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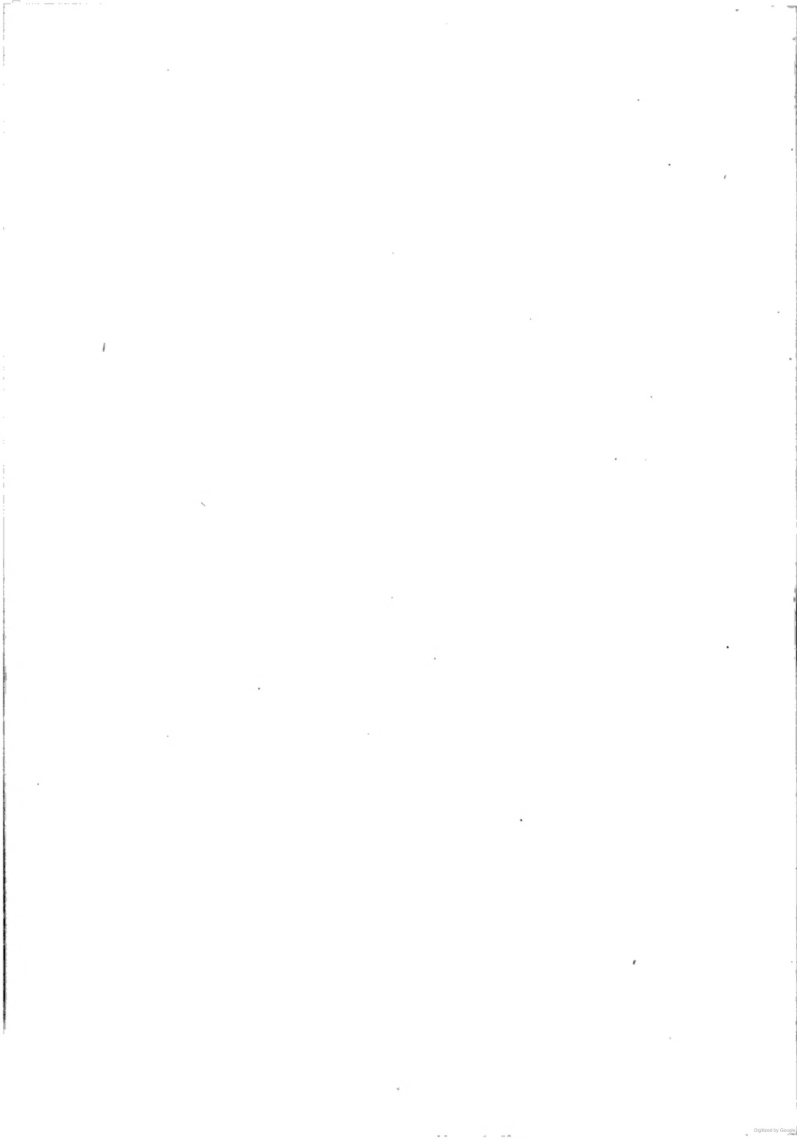


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A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE AND OTHER TALES

BY
WILKIE COLLINS.

IN ONE VOLUME.

A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE

AND OTHER TALES.

BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "AFTER DARK," "HIDE AND SEEK," &C.

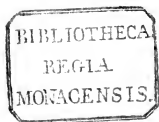
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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE	1
MAD MONKTON	89
THE BLACK COTTAGE	189
THE FAMILY SECRET	217
THE BITER BIT	249

A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE.

A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE first place I got, when I began going out to service, was not a very profitable one. I certainly gained the advantage of learning my business thoroughly, but I never had my due in the matter of wages. My master was made a bankrupt, and his servants suffered with the rest of his creditors.

My second situation, however, amply compensated me for my want of luck in the first. I had the good fortune to enter the service of Mr. and Mrs. Norcross. My master was a very rich gentleman. He had the Darrock house and lands in Cumberland, an estate also in Yorkshire, and a very large property in Jamaica, which produced at that time, and for some years afterwards, a great income. Out in the West Indies he met with a pretty young lady, a governess in an English family, and, taking a violent fancy to her, married her, though she was a good five-and-twenty years younger than himself. After the wedding they came to England; and it was at this time that I was lucky enough to be engaged by them as a servant.

I lived with my new master and mistress three

years. They had no children. At the end of that period Mr. Norcross died. He was sharp enough to foresee that his young widow would marry again; and he bequeathed his property so that it all went to Mrs. Norcross first, and then to any children she might have by a second marriage, and, failing that, to relations and friends of his own. I did not suffer by my master's death, for his widow kept me in her service. I had attended on Mr. Norcross all through his last illness, and had made myself useful enough to win my mistress's favour and gratitude. Besides me, she also retained her maid in her service — a quadroon woman named Josephine, whom she brought with her from the West Indies. Even at that time I disliked the half-breed's wheedling manners, and her cruel, tawny face, and wondered how my mistress could be so fond of her as she was. Time showed that I was right in distrusting this woman. I shall have much more to say about her when I get further advanced with my story.

Meanwhile I have next to relate that my mistress broke up the rest of her establishment, and, taking me and the lady's maid with her, went to travel on the Continent.

Among other wonderful places, we visited Paris, Genoa, Venice, Florence, Rome, and Naples, staying in some of those cities for months together. The fame of my mistress's riches followed her wherever she went; and there were plenty of gentlemen, foreigners as well as Englishmen, who were anxious enough to get into

her good graces and to prevail on her to marry them. Nobody succeeded, however, in producing any very strong or lasting impression on her; and when we came back to England, after more than two years of absence, Mrs. Norcross was still a widow, and showed no signs of wanting to change her condition.

We went to the house on the Yorkshire estate first; but my mistress did not fancy some of the company round about, so we moved again to Darrock Hall, and made excursions from time to time in the lake district, some miles off. On one of these trips Mrs. Norcross met with some old friends, who introduced her to a gentleman of their party bearing the very common, and very uninteresting, name of Mr. James Smith.

He was a tall, fine young man enough, with black hair, which grew very long, and the biggest, bushiest pair of black whiskers I ever saw. Altogether he had a rakish, unsettled look, and a bounceable way of talking, which made him the prominent person in company. He was poor enough himself, as I heard from his servant, but well connected — a gentleman by birth and education, though his manners were so free. What my mistress saw to like in him I don't know; but when she asked her friends to stay with her at Darrock, she included Mr. James Smith in the invitation. We had a fine, gay, noisy time of it at the Hall — the strange gentleman, in particular, making himself as much at home as if the place belonged to him. I was surprised at Mrs. Norcross putting up with him as she did; but I was fairly thunderstruck, some

months afterwards, when I heard that she and her free and easy visitor were actually going to be married! She had refused offers by dozens abroad, from higher and richer and better-behaved men. It seemed next to impossible that she could seriously think of throwing herself away upon such a hare-brained, headlong, penniless young gentleman as Mr. James Smith.

Married, nevertheless, they were, in due course of time; and, after spending the honeymoon abroad, they came back to Darrock Hall.

I soon found that my new master had a very variable temper. There were some days when he was as easy and familiar and pleasant with his servants as any gentleman need be. At other times some devil within him seemed to get possession of his whole nature. He flew into violent passions, and took wrong ideas into his head, which no reasoning or remonstrance could remove. It rather amazed me, considering how gay he was in his tastes, and how restless his habits were, that he should consent to live at such a quiet, dull place as Darrock. The reason for this, however, soon came out. Mr. James Smith was not much of a sportsman; he cared nothing for in-door amusements, such as reading, music, and so forth; and he had no ambition for representing the county in Parliament. The one pursuit that he was really fond of was yachting. Darrock was within sixteen miles of a seaport town, with an excellent harbour; and to this accident of position the Hall was entirely indebted for

recommending itself as a place of residence to Mr. James Smith.

He had such an untiring enjoyment and delight in cruising about at sea, and all his ideas of pleasure seemed to be so closely connected with his remembrance of the sailing trips he had taken on board different yachts belonging to his friends, that I verily believe his chief object in marrying my mistress was to get the command of money enough to keep a vessel for himself. Be that as it may, it is certain that he prevailed on her, some time after their marriage, to make him a present of a fine schooner yacht, which was brought round from Cowes to our coast-town, and kept always waiting ready for him in the harbour.

His wife required some little persuasion before she could make up her mind to let him have the vessel. She suffered so much from sea-sickness, that pleasure-sailing was out of the question for her; and, being very fond of her husband, she was naturally unwilling that he should engage in an amusement which took him away from her. However, Mr. James Smith used his influence over her cleverly, promising that he would never go away without first asking her leave, and engaging that his terms of absence at sea should never last for more than a week or ten days at a time. Accordingly, my mistress, who was the kindest and most unselfish woman in the world, put her own feelings aside, and made her husband happy in the possession of a vessel of his own.

While my master was away cruising, my mistress

had a dull time of it at the Hall. The few gentlefolks there were in our part of the county lived at a distance, and could only come to Darrock when they were asked to stay there for some days together. As for the village near us, there was but one person living in it whom my mistress could think of asking to the Hall; and that person was the clergyman who did duty at the church.

This gentleman's name was Mr. Meeke. He was a single man, very young, and very lonely in his position. He had a mild, melancholy, pasty-looking face, and was as shy and soft-spoken as a little girl — altogether, what one may call, without being unjust or severe, a poor, weak creature, and, out of all sight, the very worst preacher I ever sat under in my life. The one thing he did, which, as I heard, he could really do well, was playing on the fiddle. He was uncommonly fond of music — so much so that he often took his instrument out with him when he went for a walk. This taste of his was his great recommendation to my mistress, who was a wonderfully fine player on the piano, and who was delighted to get such a performer as Mr. Meeke to play duets with her. Besides liking his society for this reason, she felt for him in his lonely position; naturally enough I think, considering how often she was left in solitude herself. Mr. Meeke, on his side, when he got over his first shyness, was only too glad to leave his lonesome little parsonage for the fine music room at the Hall, and for the company of a handsome, kind-hearted lady, who

made much of him and admired his fiddle-playing with all her heart. Thus it happened that, whenever my master was away at sea, my mistress and Mr. Mecke were always together, playing duets as if they had their living to get by it. A more harmless connection than the connection between those two never existed in this world; and yet, innocent as it was, it turned out to be the first cause of all the misfortunes that afterward happened.

My master's treatment of Mr. Mecke was, from the first, the very opposite of my mistress's. The restless, rackety, bounceable Mr. James Smith felt a contempt for the weak, womanish, fiddling little parson; and, what was more, did not care to conceal it. For this reason, Mr. Mecke (who was dreadfully frightened by my master's violent language and rough ways) very seldom visited at the Hall, except when my mistress was alone there. Meaning no wrong, and therefore stooping to no concealment, she never thought of taking any measures to keep Mr. Mecke out of the way when he happened to be with her at the time of her husband's coming home, whether it was only from a riding excursion in the neighbourhood, or from a cruise in the schooner. In this way it so turned out that whenever my master came home, after a long or short absence, in nine cases out of ten he found the parson at the Hall.

At first he used to laugh at this circumstance, and to amuse himself with some coarse jokes at the expense of his wife and her companion. But, after a while, his

variable temper changed, as usual. He grew sulky, rude, angry, and, at last, downright jealous of Mr. Meeke. Though too proud to confess it in so many words, he still showed the state of his mind clearly enough to my mistress to excite her indignation. She was a woman who could be led anywhere by any one for whom she had a regard; but there was a firm spirit within her that rose at the slightest show of injustice or oppression, and that resented tyrannical usage of any sort, perhaps a little too warmly. The bare suspicion that her husband could feel any distrust of her, set her all in a flame; and she took the most unfortunate, and yet, at the same time, the most natural way for a woman, of resenting it. The ruder her husband was to Mr. Meeke, the more kindly she behaved to him. This led to serious disputes and dissensions, and thence, in time, to a violent quarrel. I could not avoid hearing the last part of the altercation between them, for it took place in the garden-walk, outside the dining-room window, while I was occupied in laying the table for lunch.

Without repeating their words — which I have no right to do, having heard by accident what I had no business to hear — I may say generally, to show how serious the quarrel was, that my mistress charged my master with having married from mercenary motives, with keeping out of her company as much as he could, and with insulting her by a suspicion which it would be hard ever to forgive, and impossible ever to forget. He replied by violent language directed against her-

self, and by commanding her never to open the doors again to Mr. Meeke; she, on her side, declaring that she would never consent to insult a clergyman and a gentleman in order to satisfy the whim of a tyrannical husband. Upon that he called out, with a greath oath, to have his horse saddled directly, declaring that he would not stop another instant under the same roof with a woman who had set him at defiance; and warning his wife that he would come back, if Mr. Meeke entered the house again, and horsewhip him, in spite of his black coat, all through the village.

With those words he left her, and rode away to the sea-port where his yacht was lying. My mistress kept up her spirit till he was out of sight, and then burst into a dreadful screaming passion of tears, which ended by leaving her so weak that she had to be carried to her bed like a woman who was at the point of death.

The same evening my master's horse was ridden back by a messenger, who brought a scrap of note-paper with him, addressed to me. It only contained these lines: —

“Pack up my clothes, and deliver them immediately to the bearer. You may tell your mistress that I sail to-night, at eleven o'clock, for a cruise to Sweden. Forward my letters to the Post-office, Stockholm.”

I obeyed the orders given to me, except that relating to my mistress. The doctor had been sent for, and was still in the house. I consulted him upon the propriety of my delivering the message. He positively

forbade me to do so, that night; and told me to give him the slip of paper and leave it to his discretion to show it to her, or not, the next morning.

The messenger had hardly been gone an hour when Mr. Meeke's housekeeper came to the Hall with a roll of music for my mistress. I told the woman of my master's sudden departure, and of the doctor being in the house. This news brought Mr. Meeke himself to the Hall in a great flutter.

I felt so angry with him for being the cause — innocent as he might be — of the shocking scene which had taken place, that I exceeded the bounds of my duty, and told him the whole truth. The poor, weak, wavering, childish creature flushed up red in the face, then turned as pale as ashes, and dropped into one of the hall chairs, crying — literally crying fit to break his heart! "Oh, William!" says he, wringing his little, frail, trembling, white hands, as helpless as a baby, "Oh, William, what am I to do?"

"As you ask me that question, sir," says I, "you will excuse me, I hope, if, being a servant, I plainly speak my mind notwithstanding. I know my station well enough to be aware that, strictly speaking, I have done wrong, and far exceeded my duty, in telling you as much as I have told you already. But I would go through fire and water, sir," says I, feeling my own eyes getting moist, "for my mistress's sake. She has no relation here who can speak to you; and it is even better that a servant like me should risk being guilty of an impertinence, than that dreadful and lasting mis-

chief should arise from the right remedy not being applied at the right time. This is what I should do, sir, in your place. Saving your presence, I should leave off crying, and go back home and write to Mr. James Smith, saying that I would not, as a clergyman, give him railing for railing, but would prove how unworthily he had suspected me, by ceasing to visit at the Hall from this time forth, rather than be a cause of dissension between man and wife. If you will put that into proper language, sir, and will have the letter ready for me in half an hour's time, I will call for it on the fastest horse in our stables, and, at my own risk, will give it to my master before he sails to-night. I have nothing more to say, sir, except to ask your pardon for forgetting my proper place, and for making bold to speak on a very serious matter as equal to equal, and as man to man."

To do Mr. Meeke justice, he had a heart, though it was a very small one. He shook hands with me, and said he accepted my advice as the advice of a friend; and so went back to his parsonage to write the letter. In half an hour I called for it on horseback, but it was not ready for me. Mr. Meeke was ridiculously nice about how he should express himself when he got a pen into his hand. I found him with his desk littered with rough copies, in a perfect agony about how to turn his phrases delicately enough in referring to my mistress. Every minute being precious, I hurried him as much as I could, without standing on any ceremony. It took half an hour more, with all my efforts, before

he could make up his mind that the letter would do. I started off with it at a gallop, and never drew rein till I got to the sea-port town.

The harbour-clock chimed the quarter past eleven as I rode by it, and when I got down to the jetty, there was no yacht to be seen. She had been cast off from her moorings ten minutes before eleven, and as the clock struck she had sailed out of the harbour. I would have followed in a boat, but it was a fine starlight night, with a fresh wind blowing; and the sailors on the pier laughed at me when I spoke of rowing after a schooner-yacht which had got a quarter of an hour's start of us, with the wind abeam and the tide in her favour.

I rode back with a heavy heart. All I could do now was to send the letter to the Post-office, Stockholm.

The next day the doctor showed my mistress the scrap of paper with the message on it from my master; and an hour or two after that, a letter was sent to her in Mr. Meeke's handwriting, explaining the reason why she must not expect to see him at the Hall, and referring to me in terms of high praise as a sensible and faithful man who had spoken the right word at the right time. I am able to repeat the substance of the letter, because I heard all about it from my mistress, under very unpleasant circumstances so far as I was concerned.

The news of my master's departure did not affect her as the doctor had supposed it would. Instead of

distressing her, it roused her spirit and made her angry; her pride, as I imagine, being wounded by the contemptuous manner in which her husband had notified his intention of sailing to Sweden, at the end of a message to a servant about packing his clothes. Finding her in that temper of mind, the letter from Mr. Meeke only irritated her the more. She insisted on getting up, and as soon as she was dressed and down stairs, she vented her violent humour on me, reproaching me for impertinent interference in the affairs of my betters, and declaring that she had almost made up her mind to turn me out of my place for it. I did not defend myself, because I respected her sorrows and irritation that came from them; also, because I knew the natural kindness of her nature well enough to be assured that she would make amends to me for her harshness the moment her mind was composed again. The result showed that I was right. That same evening she sent for me, and begged me to forgive and forget the hasty words she had spoken in the morning, with a grace and sweetness that would have won the heart of any man who listened to her.

Weeks passed after this, till it was more than a month since the day of my master's departure, and no letter in his handwriting came to Darrock Hall.

My mistress, taking this treatment of her more angrily than sorrowfully, went to London to consult her nearest relations, who lived there. On leaving home, she stopped the carriage at the parsonage, and

went in (as I thought, rather defiantly) to say good-by to Mr. Meeke. She had answered his letter, and received others from him, and had answered them likewise. She had also, of course, seen him every Sunday at church, and had always stopped to speak to him after the service. But this was the first occasion on which she had visited him at his house. As the carriage stopped, the little parson came out, in great hurry and agitation, to meet her at the garden-gate.

"Don't look alarmed, Mr. Meeke," says my mistress, getting out. "Though you have engaged not to come near the Hall, I have made no promise to keep away from the parsonage." With those words she went into the house.

The quadroon maid, Josephine, was sitting with me in the rumble of the carriage, and I saw a smile on her tawny face as the parson and his visitor went into the house together. Harmless as Mr. Meeke was, and innocent of all wrong as I knew my mistress to be, I regretted that she should be so rash as to despise appearances, considering the situation she was placed in. She had already exposed herself to be thought of disrespectfully by her own maid; and it was hard to say what worse consequences might not happen after that.

Half an hour later, we were away on our journey. My mistress staid in London two months. Throughout all that long time no letter from my master was forwarded to her from the country-house.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN the two months had passed, we returned to Darrock Hall. Nobody there had received any news in our absence of the whereabouts of my master and his yacht.

Six more weary weeks elapsed; and in that time but one event happened at the Hall to vary the dismal monotony of the lives we now led in the solitary place. One morning Josephine came down, after dressing my mistress, with her face downright livid to look at, except on one cheek, where there was a mark as red as burning fire. I was in the kitchen at the time, and I asked what was the matter.

"The matter!" says she, in her shrill voice and her half-foreign English. "Use your own eyes, if you please, and look at this cheek of mine. What! have you lived so long a time with your mistress, and don't you know the mark of her hand yet?"

I was at a loss to understand what she meant, but she soon explained herself. My mistress, whose temper had been sadly altered for the worse by the trials and humiliations she had gone through, had got up that morning more out of humour than usual; and, in answer to her maid's inquiry as to how she had passed the night, had began talking about her weary, miserable life in an unusually fretful and desperate way. Josephine, in trying to cheer her spirits, had ventured,

most improperly, on making a light, jesting reference to Mr. Meeke, which had so enraged my mistress that she turned round sharp on the half-breed, and gave her — to use the common phrase — a smart box on the ear. Josephine confessed that the moment after she had done this, her better sense appeared to tell her that she had taken a most improper way of resenting undue familiarity. She had immediately expressed her regret for having forgotten herself, and had proved the sincerity of it by a gift of half a dozen cambric handkerchiefs, presented as a peace-offering on the spot. After that, I thought it impossible that Josephine could bear any malice against a mistress whom she had served ever since she had been a girl, and I said as much to her when she had done telling me what had happened upstairs.

"I! Malice!" cries Miss Josephine, in her hard, sharp, snappish way. "And why, and wherefore, if you please? If my mistress smacks my cheek with one hand, she gives me handkerchiefs to wipe it with the other. My good mistress, my kind mistress, my pretty mistress! I, the servant, bear malice against her, the mistress! Ah, you bad man, even to think of such a thing! Ah, fie, fie! I am quite ashamed of you."

She gave me one look — the wickedest look I ever saw; and burst out laughing — the harshest laugh I ever heard from a woman's lips. Turning away from me directly after, she said no more, and

never referred to the subject again on any subsequent occasion.

From that time, however, I noticed an alteration in Miss Josephine; not in her way of doing her work, for she was just as sharp and careful about it as ever, but in her manners and habits. She grew amazingly quiet, and passed almost all her leisure time alone. I could bring no charge against her which authorised me to speak a word of warning; but, for all that, I could not help feeling that if I had been in my mistress's place, I would have followed up the present of the cambric handkerchiefs by paying her a month's wages in advance, and sending her away from the house the same evening.

With the exception of this little domestic matter, which appeared trifling enough at the time, but which led to very serious consequences afterwards, nothing happened at all out of the ordinary way during the six weary weeks to which I have referred. At the beginning of the seventh week, however, an event occurred at last.

One morning the postman brought a letter to the Hall, addressed to my mistress. I took it upstairs, and looked at the direction as I put it on the salver. The handwriting was not my master's; was not, as it appeared to me, the handwriting of any well-educated person. The outside of the letter was also very dirty; and the seal a common office-seal of the usual lattice-work pattern. "This must be a begging-letter," I

thought to myself as I entered the breakfast-room and advanced with it to my mistress.

She held up her hand before she opened it, as a sign to me that she had some order to give, and that I was not to leave the room till I had received it. Then she broke the seal, and began to read the letter.

Her eyes had hardly been on it a moment before her face turned as pale as death, and the paper began to tremble in her fingers. She read on to the end, and suddenly turned from pale to scarlet, started out of her chair, crumpled the letter up violently in her hand, and took several turns backwards and forwards in the room, without seeming to notice me as I stood by the door. "You villain! you villain! you villain!" I heard her whisper to herself many times over, in a quick, hissing, fierce way. Then she stopped, and said on a sudden, "Can it be true?" Then she looked up, and seeing me standing at the door, started as if I had been a stranger, changed colour again, and told me, in a stifled voice, to leave her and come back again in half an hour. I obeyed, feeling certain that she must have received some very bad news of her husband, and wondering, anxiously enough, what it might be.

When I returned to the breakfast-room, her face was as much discomposed as ever. Without speaking a word, she handed me two sealed letters. One, a note to be left for Mr. Meeke at the parsonage; the other, a letter marked "Immediate," and addressed to her

solicitor in London, who was also, I should add, her nearest living relative.

I left one of these letters, and posted the other. When I came back, I heard that my mistress had taken to her room. She remained there for four days, keeping her new sorrow, whatever it was, strictly to herself. On the fifth day, the lawyer from London arrived at the Hall. My mistress went down to him in the library, and was shut up there with him for nearly two hours. At the end of that time the bell rang for me.

"Sit down, William," said my mistress when I came into the room. "I feel such entire confidence in your fidelity and attachment that I am about, with the full concurrence of this gentleman, who is my nearest relative and my legal adviser, to place a very serious secret in your keeping, and to employ your services on a matter which is as important to me as a matter of life and death."

Her poor eyes were very red, and her lips quivered as she spoke to me. I was so startled by what she had said that I hardly knew which chair to sit in. She pointed to one placed near herself at the table, and seemed about to speak to me again, when the lawyer interfered.

"Let me entreat you," he said, "not to agitate yourself unnecessarily. I will put this person in possession of the facts; and if I omit anything, you shall stop me and set me right."

My mistress leaned back in her chair, and covered

her face with her handkerchief. The lawyer waited a moment, and then addressed himself to me.

"You are already aware," he said, "of the circumstances under which your master left this house; and you also know, I have no doubt, that no direct news of him has reached your mistress up to this time?"

I bowed to him, and said I knew of the circumstances so far.

"Do you remember," he went on, "taking a letter to your mistress five days ago?"

"Yes, sir," I replied; "a letter which seemed to distress and alarm her very seriously."

"I will read you that letter before we say any more," continued the lawyer. "I warn you beforehand that it contains a terrible charge against your master, which, however, is not attested by the writer's signature. I have already told your mistress that she must not attach too much importance to an anonymous letter; and I now tell you the same thing."

Saying that, he took up a letter from the table and read it aloud. I had a copy of it given to me afterwards, which I looked at often enough to fix the contents of the letter in my memory. I can now repeat them, I think, word for word.

"MADAM,

"I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave you in total ignorance of your husband's atrocious conduct towards you. If you have ever been disposed to regret his absence, do so no longer. Hope and pray,

rather, that you and he may never meet face to face again in this world. I write in great haste, and in great fear of being observed. Time fails me to prepare you as you ought to be prepared for what I have now to disclose. I must tell you plainly, with much respect for you and sorrow for your misfortune, that your husband *has married another wife*. I saw the ceremony performed, unknown to him. If I could not have spoken of this infamous act as an eye-witness, I would not have spoken of it at all.

"I dare not acknowledge who I am, for I believe Mr. James Smith would stick at no crime to revenge himself on me if he ever came to a knowledge of the step I am now taking, and of the means by which I got my information. Neither have I time to enter into particulars. I simply warn you of what has happened, and leave you to act on that warning as you please. You may disbelieve this letter, because it is not signed by any name. In that case, if Mr. James Smith should ever venture into your presence, I recommend you to ask him suddenly what he has done with his *new wife*; and to see if his countenance does not immediately testify that the truth has been spoken by

"YOUR UNKNOWN FRIEND."

Poor as my opinion was of my master, I had never believed him to be capable of such villainy as this, and I could not believe it, when the lawyer had done reading the letter.

"Oh, sir!" I said; "surely that is some base imposition? Surely it cannot be true?"

"That is what I have told your mistress," he answered. "But she says in return —"

"That I feel it to be true," my mistress broke in, speaking behind the handkerchief, in a faint smothered voice.

"We need not debate the question," the lawyer went on. "Our business now is to prove the truth or falsehood of this letter. That must be done at once. I have written to one of my clerks, who is accustomed to conducting delicate investigations, to come to this house without loss of time. He is to be trusted with anything, and he will pursue the needful inquiries immediately. It is absolutely necessary, to make sure of committing no mistakes, that he should be accompanied by some one who is well acquainted with Mr. James Smith's habits and personal appearance; and your mistress has fixed upon you to be that person. However well the inquiry is managed, it may be attended by much trouble and delay, may necessitate a long journey, and may involve some personal danger. Are you," said the lawyer, looking hard at me, "ready to suffer any inconvenience and to run any risk for your mistress's sake?"

"There is nothing I *can* do, sir," said I, "that I will not do. I am afraid I am not clever enough to be of much use. But so far as troubles and risks are concerned, I am ready for anything from this moment."

My mistress took the handkerchief from her face,

looked at me with her eyes full of tears, and held out her hand. How I came to do it I don't know, but I stooped down and kissed the hand she offered me; feeling half startled, half ashamed at my own boldness the moment after.

"You will do, my man," said the lawyer, nodding his head. "Don't trouble yourself about the cleverness or the cunning that may be wanted. My clerk has got head enough for two. I have only one word more to say before you go down stairs again. Remember that this investigation, and the cause that leads to it, must be kept a profound secret. Except us three, and the clergyman here (to whom your mistress has written word of what has happened) nobody knows anything about it. I will let my clerk into the secret, when he joins us. As soon as you and he are away from the house, you may talk about it. Until then, you will close your lips on the subject."

The clerk did not keep us long waiting. He came as fast as the mail from London could bring him.

I had expected, from his master's description, to see a serious, sedate man, rather sly in his looks, and rather reserved in his manner. To my amazement, this practised hand at delicate investigations was a brisk, plump, jolly little man, with a comfortable double chin, a pair of very bright black eyes, and a big bottle-nose of the true groggy red colour. He wore a suit of black, and a limp, dingy white cravat; took snuff perpetually out of a very large box; walked with

his hands crossed behind his back; and looked, upon the whole, much more like a person of free and easy habits than a lawyer's clerk.

"How d'ye do?" says he, when I opened the door to him. "I'm the man you expect from the office in London. Just say Mr. Dark, will you? I'll sit down here till you come back; and, young man, if there is such a thing as a glass of ale in the house, I don't mind committing myself so far as to say that I'll drink it."

I got him the ale before I announced him. He winked at me as he put it to his lips.

"Your good health," says he. "I like you. Don't forget that the name's Dark; and just leave the jug and glass, will you, in case my master keeps me waiting."

I announced him at once, and was told to show him into the library.

When I got back to the hall the jug was empty, and Mr. Dark was comforting himself with a pinch of snuff, snorting over it like a perfect grampus. He had swallowed more than a pint of the strongest old ale in the house; and, for all the effect it seemed to have had on him, he might just as well have been drinking so much water.

As I led him along the passage to the library, Josephine passed us. Mr. Dark winked at me again, and made her a low bow.

"Lady's maid," I heard him whisper to himself. "A fine woman to look at, but a damned bad one to

deal with." I turned round on him, rather angry at his cool ways, and looked hard at him just before I opened the library door. Mr. Dark looked hard at *me*. "All right," says he. "I can show myself in." And he knocks at the door, and opens it, and goes in with another wicked wink, all in a moment.

Half an hour later, the bell rang for me. Mr. Dark was sitting between my mistress (who was looking at him in amazement) and the lawyer (who was looking at him with approval). He had a map open on his knee, and a pen in his hand. Judging by his face, the communication of the secret about my master did not seem to have made the smallest impression on him.

"I've got leave to ask you a question," says he, the moment I appeared. "When you found your master's yacht gone, did you hear which way she had sailed? Was it northward toward Scotland? Speak up, young man, speak up!"

"Yes," I answered. "The boatmen told me that, when I made inquiries at the harbour."

"Well, sir," says Mr. Dark, turning to the lawyer, "if he said he was going to Sweden, he seems to have started on the road to it, at all events. I think I have got my instructions now?"

The lawyer nodded, and looked at my mistress, who bowed her head to him. He then said, turning to me: —

"Pack up your bag for travelling at once, and have a conveyance got ready to go to the nearest post town. Look sharp, young man — look sharp!"

"And whatever happens in the future," added my mistress, her kind voice trembling a little, "believe, William, that I shall never forget the proof you now show of your devotion to me. It is still some comfort to know that I have your fidelity to depend on in this dreadful trial — your fidelity and the extraordinary intelligence and experience of Mr. Dark."

Mr. Dark did not seem to hear the compliment. He was busy writing, with his paper upon the map on his knee.

A quarter of an hour later, when I had ordered the dog-cart, and had got down into the hall with my bag packed, I found him there waiting for me. He was sitting in the same chair which he had occupied when he first arrived, and he had another jug of the old ale on the table by his side.

"Got any fishing-rods in the house?" says hé, when I put my bag down in the hall.

"Yes," I replied, astonished at the question. "What do you want with them?"

"Pack a couple in cases for travelling," says Mr. Dark, "with lines and hooks and fly-books all complete. Have a drop of the ale before you go — and don't stare, William, don't stare. I'll let the light in on you as soon as we are out of the house. Off with you for the rods! I want to be on the road in five minutes."

When I came back with the rods and tackle, I found Mr. Dark in the dog-cart.

"Money, luggage, fishing rods, papers of directions,

copy of anonymous letter, guide-book, map," says he, running over in his mind the things wanted for the journey. "All right so far. Drive off."

I took the reins and started the horse. As we left the house, I saw my mistress and Josephine looking after us from two of the windows on the second floor. The memory of those two attentive faces — one so fair and so good — the other so yellow and so wicked — haunted my mind perpetually for many days afterward.

"Now, William," says Mr. Dark, when we were clear of the lodge gates, "I'm going to begin by telling you that you must step out of your own character till further notice. You are a clerk in a bank; and I'm another. We have got our regular holiday, that comes, like Christmas, once a year; and we are taking a little tour in Scotland, to see the curiosities, and to breathe the sea air, and to get some fishing whenever we can. I'm the fat cashier who digs holes in a drawerful of gold with a copper shovel. And you're the arithmetical young man who sits on a perch behind me and keeps the books. Scotland's a beautiful country, William. Can you make whisky-toddy? I can; and what's more, unlikely as the thing may seem to you, I can actually drink it into the bargain."

"Scotland!" says I. "What are we going to Scotland for?"

"Question for question," says Mr. Dark. "What are we starting on a journey for?"

"To find my master," I answered, "and to make sure if the letter about him is true."

"Very good," says he. "How would *you* set about doing that, eh?"

"I should go and ask about him at Stockholm in Sweden, where he said his letters were to be sent."

"Should you indeed?" says Mr. Dark. "If you were a shepherd, William, and had lost a sheep in Cumberland, would you begin looking for it at the Land's End, or would you try a little nearer home?"

"You're attempting to make a fool of me now," says I.

"No," says Mr. Dark, "I'm only letting the light in on you, as I said I would. Now listen to reason, William, and profit by it as much as you can. Mr. James Smith says he is going on a cruise to Sweden, and makes his word good, at the beginning, by starting northward toward the coast of Scotland. What does he go in? A yacht. Do yachts carry live beasts and a butcher on board? No. Will joints of meat keep fresh all the way from Cumberland to Sweden? No. Do gentlemen like living on salt provisions? No. What follows from these three Noes? That Mr. James Smith must have stopped somewhere, on the way to Sweden, to supply his sea-larder with fresh provisions. Where, in that case, must he stop? Somewhere in Scotland, supposing he didn't alter his course when he was out of sight of your sea-port. Where in Scotland? Northward on the main land, or westward at one of the islands? Most likely on the main land, where the sea-side places are largest, and where he is sure of getting all the stores he wants. Next, what is our business?

Not to risk losing a link in the chain of evidence by missing any place where he has put his foot on shore. Not to overshoot the mark when we want to hit it in the bull's-eye. Not to waste money and time by taking a long trip to Sweden till we know that we must absolutely go there. Where is our journey of discovery to take us to first, then? Clearly to the north of Scotland. What do you say to that, Mr. William? Is my catechism all correct, or has your strong ale muddled my head?"

It was evident by this time that no ale could do that, and I told him so. He chuckled, winked at me, and taking another pinch of snuff, said he would now turn the whole case over in his mind again, and make sure that he had got all the bearings of it quite clear.

By the time we reached the post-town, he had accomplished this mental effort to his own perfect satisfaction, and was quite ready to compare the ale at the inn with the ale at Darrock Hall. The dog-cart was left to be taken back the next morning by the ostler. A post-chaise and horses were ordered out. A loaf of bread, a Bologna sausage, and two bottles of sherry were put into the pockets of the carriage; we took our seats, and started briskly on our doubtful journey.

"One word more of friendly advice," says Mr. Dark, settling himself comfortably in his corner of the carriage. "Take your sleep, William, whenever you feel that you can get it. You won't find yourself in bed again till we get to Glasgow."

CHAPTER III.

ALTHOUGH the events that I am now relating happened many years ago, I shall still, for caution's sake, avoid mentioning by name the various places visited by Mr. Dark and myself for the purpose of making inquiries. It will be enough if I describe generally what we did, and if I mention in substance only the result at which we ultimately arrived.

On reaching Glasgow, Mr. Dark turned the whole case over in his mind once more. The result was that he altered his intention of going straight to the north of Scotland, considering it safer to make sure, if possible, of the course the yacht had taken in her cruise along the western coast.

The carrying out of this new resolution involved the necessity of delaying our onward journey by perpetually diverging from the direct road. Three times we were sent uselessly to wild places in the Hebrides by false reports. Twice we wandered away inland, following gentlemen who answered generally to the description of Mr. James Smith, but who turned out to be the wrong men as soon as we set eyes on them. These vain excursions — especially the three to the western islands — consumed time terribly. It was more than two months from the day when we had left Darrock Hall before we found ourselves up at the

very top of Scotland at last, driving into a considerable sea-side town, with a harbour attached to it. Thus far, our journey had led to no results, and I began to despair of success. As for Mr. Dark, he never got to the end of his sweet temper and his wonderful patience.

"You don't know how to wait, William," was his constant remark whenever he heard me complaining. "I do."

We drove into the town towards evening in a modest little gig, and put up, according to our usual custom, at one of the inferior inns.

"We must begin at the bottom," Mr. Dark used to say. "High company in a coffee-room won't be familiar with us. Low company in a tap-room will." And he certainly proved the truth of his own words. The like of him for making intimate friends of total strangers at the shortest notice, I have never met with before or since. Cautious as the Scotch are, Mr. Dark seemed to have the knack of twisting them round his finger as he pleased. He varied his way artfully with different men; but there were three standing opinions of his which he made a point of expressing in all varieties of company while we were in Scotland. In the first place, he thought the view of Edinburgh from Arthur's Seat the finest in the world. In the second place, he considered whisky to be the most wholesome spirit in the world. In the third place, he believed his late beloved mother to be the best woman in the world. It may be worthy of note that, whenever he

expressed this last opinion in Scotland, he invariably added that her maiden name was Macleod.

"Well, we put up at a modest little inn near the harbour. I was dead tired with the journey, and lay down on my bed to get some rest. Mr. Dark, whom nothing ever fatigued, left me to take his toddy and pipe among the company in the tap-room.

I don't know how long I had been asleep, when I was roused by a shake on my shoulder. The room was pitch dark, and I felt a hand suddenly clapped over my mouth. Then a strong smell of whisky and tobacco saluted my nostrils, and a whisper stole into my ear —

"William! we have got to the end of our journey."

"Mr. Dark," I stammered out, "is that you? What in heaven's name do you mean?"

"The yacht put in here," was the answer, still in a whisper, "and your blackguard of a master came ashore —"

"Oh, Mr. Dark," I broke in, "don't tell me that the letter is true!"

"Every word of it," says he. "He was married here, and he was off again to the Mediterranean with Number Two a good three weeks before we left your mistress's house. Hush! don't say a word. Go to sleep again, or strike a light and read, if you like it better. Do anything but come downstairs with me. I'm going to find out all the particulars, without seeming to want to know one of them. Yours is a very good-looking face, William, but it's so infernally

honest that I can't trust it in the tap-room. I'm making friends with Scotchmen already. They know my opinion of Arthur's Seat; they *see* what I think of whisky; and I rather think it won't be long before they hear that my mother's maiden name was Macleod."

With those words he slipped out of the room, and left me, as he had found me, in the dark.

I was far too much agitated by what I had heard to think of going to sleep again; so I struck a light, and tried to amuse myself as well as I could with an old newspaper that had been stuffed into my carpet bag. It was then nearly ten o'clock. Two hours later, when the house shut up, Mr. Dark came back to me again in high spirits.

"I have got the whole case here," says he, tapping his forehead — "the whole case, as neat and clean as if it was drawn in a brief. That master of yours doesn't stick at a trifle, William. It's my opinion that your mistress and you have not seen the last of him yet."

We were sleeping that night in a double-bedded room. As soon as Mr. Dark had secured the door and disposed himself comfortably in his bed, he entered on a detailed narrative of the particulars communicated to him in the tap-room. The substance of what he told me may be related as follows: —

The yacht had had a wonderful run all the way to Cape Wrath. On rounding that headland, she had met the wind nearly dead against her, and had beaten

every inch of the way to the seaport town, where she had put in to get a supply of provisions, and to wait for a change in the wind.

Mr. James Smith had gone ashore to look about him, and to see whether the principal hotel was the sort of house at which he would like to stop for a few days. In the course of his wandering about the town, his attention had been attracted to a decent house, where lodgings were to be let, by the sight of a very pretty girl sitting at work at the parlour-window. He was so struck by her face that he came back twice to look at it, determining, the second time, to try if he could not make acquaintance with her by asking to see the lodgings. He was shown the rooms by the girl's mother, a very respectable woman, whom he discovered to be the wife of the master and part owner of a small coasting vessel, then away at sea. With a little manœuvring he managed to get into the parlour where the daughter was at work, and to exchange a few words with her. Her voice and manner completed the attraction of her face. Mr. James Smith decided, in his headlong way, that he was violently in love with her; and, without hesitating another instant, he took the lodgings on the spot for a month certain.

It is unnecessary to say that his designs on the girl were of the most disgraceful kind, and that he represented himself to the mother and daughter as a single man. Helped by his advantages of money, position, and personal appearance, he had made sure that the ruin of the girl might be effected with very little

difficulty; but he soon found that he had undertaken no easy conquest.

The mother's watchfulness never slept, and the daughter's presence of mind never failed her. She admired Mr. James Smith's tall figure and splendid whiskers; she showed the most encouraging partiality for his society; she smiled at his compliments, and blushed whenever he looked at her; but, whether it was cunning, or whether it was innocence, she seemed incapable of understanding that his advances toward her were of any other than an honourable kind. At the slightest approach to undue familiarity, she drew back with a kind of contemptuous surprise in her face, which utterly perplexed Mr. James Smith. He had not calculated on that sort of resistance, and he could not see his way to overcoming it. The weeks passed; the month for which he had taken the lodgings expired. Time had strengthened the girl's hold on him, till his admiration for her amounted to downright infatuation; and he had not advanced one step yet towards the fulfilment of the vicious purpose with which he had entered the house.

At this time he must have made some fresh attempt on the girl's virtue, which produced a coolness between them; for, instead of taking the lodgings for another term, he removed to his yacht in the harbour, and slept on board for two nights.

The wind was now fair, and the stores were on board; but he gave no orders to the sailing-master to weigh anchor. On the third day, the cause of the

coolness, whatever it was, appears to have been removed, and he returned to his lodgings on shore. Some of the more inquisitive among the townspeople observed soon afterwards, when they met him in the street, that he looked rather anxious and uneasy. The conclusion had probably forced itself upon his mind, by this time, that he must decide on pursuing one of two courses. Either he must resolve to make the sacrifice of leaving the girl altogether, or he must commit the villany of marrying her.

Scoundrel as he was, he hesitated at encountering the risk — perhaps, also, at being guilty of the crime — involved in this last alternative. While he was still in doubt, the father's coasting vessel sailed into the harbour, and the father's presence on the scene decided him at last. How this new influence acted, it was impossible to find out, from the imperfect evidence of persons who were not admitted to the family councils. The fact, however, was certain, that the date of the father's return, and the date of Mr. James Smith's first wicked resolution to marry the girl, might both be fixed, as nearly as possible, at one and the same time.

Having once made up his mind to the commission of the crime, he proceeded, with all possible coolness and cunning, to provide against the chances of detection.

Returning on board his yacht, he announced that he had given up his intention of cruising to Sweden, and that he intended to amuse himself by a long

fishing tour in Scotland. After this explanation, he ordered the vessel to be laid up in the harbour, gave the sailing-master leave of absence to return to his family at Cowes, and paid off the whole of the crew, from the mate to the cabin-boy. By these means he cleared the scene, at one blow, of the only people in the town who knew of the existence of his unhappy wife. After that, the news of his approaching marriage might be made public without risk of discovery; his own common name being of itself a sufficient protection, in case the event was mentioned in the Scotch newspapers. All his friends, even his wife herself, might read a report of the marriage of Mr. James Smith, without having the slightest suspicion of who the bridegroom really was.

A fortnight after the paying off of the crew, he was married to the merchant-captain's daughter. The father of the girl was well known among his fellow-townsmen as a selfish, grasping man, who was too anxious to secure a rich son-in-law to object to any proposals for hastening the marriage. He and his wife, and a few intimate relations had been present at the ceremony; and, after it had been performed, the newly-married couple left the town at once for a honeymoon trip to the Highland Lakes.

Two days later, however, they unexpectedly returned, announcing a complete change in their plans. The bridegroom (thinking, probably, that he would be safer out of England than in it) had been pleasing the bride's fancy by his descriptions of the climate and

the scenery of southern parts. The new Mrs. James Smith was all curiosity to see Spain and Italy; and, having often proved herself an excellent sailor on board her father's vessel, was anxious to go to the Mediterranean in the easiest way by sea. Her affectionate husband, having now no other object in life than to gratify her wishes, had given up the Highland excursion, and had returned to have his yacht got ready for sea immediately. In this explanation there was nothing to awaken the suspicions of the lady's parents. The mother thought Mr. James Smith a model among bridegrooms. The father lent his assistance to man the yacht at the shortest notice, with as smart a crew as could be picked up about the town. Principally through his exertions, the vessel was got ready for sea with extraordinary dispatch. The sails were bent, the provisions were put on board, and Mr. James Smith sailed for the Mediterranean with the unfortunate woman who believed herself to be his wife, before Mr. Dark and myself set forth to look after him from Darrock Hall.

Such was the true account of my master's infamous conduct in Scotland, as it was related to me. On concluding, Mr. Dark hinted that he had something still left to tell me, but declared that he was too sleepy to talk any more that night. As soon as we were awake the next morning, he returned to the subject.

"I didn't finish all I had to say, last night, did I?" he began.

"You unfortunately told me enough, and more than enough, to prove the truth of the statement in the anonymous letter," I answered.

"Yes," says Mr. Dark, "but did I tell you who wrote the anonymous letter?"

"You don't mean to say that you have found that out!" says I.

"I think I have," was the cool answer. "When I heard about your precious master paying off the regular crew of the yacht, I put the circumstance by in my mind, to be brought out again and sifted a little as soon as the opportunity offered. It offered in about half an hour. Says I to the gauger, who was the principal talker in the room, 'How about those men that Mr. Smith paid off? Did they all go as soon as they got their money, or did they stop here till they had spent every farthing of it in the public-houses?' The gauger laughs. 'No such luck,' says he, in the broadest possible Scotch (which I'll translate into English, William, for your benefit). 'No such luck; they all went south, to spend their money among finer people than us. All, that is to say, with one exception. It was thought the steward of the yacht had gone along with the rest; when, the very day Mr. Smith sailed for the Mediterranean, who should turn up unexpectedly but the steward himself? Where he had been hiding, and why he had been hiding, nobody could tell.' 'Perhaps he had been imitating his master, and looking out for a wife,' says I. 'Likely enough,' says the gauger; 'he gave a very confused account of himself,

and he cut all questions short by going away south in a violent hurry.' That was enough for me: I let the subject drop. Clear as daylight, isn't it, William? The steward suspected something wrong — the steward waited and watched — the steward wrote that anonymous letter to your mistress. We can find him, if we want him, by inquiring at Cowes; and we can send to the church for legal evidence of the marriage as soon as we are instructed to do so. All that we have got to do now is to go back to your mistress, and see what course she means to take under the circumstances. It's a pretty case, William, so far — an uncommonly pretty case, as it stands at present."

We returned to Darrock Hall as fast as coaches and post-horses could carry us.

Having from the first believed that the statement in the anonymous letter was true, my mistress received the bad news we brought, calmly and resignedly — so far, at least, as outward appearances went. She astonished and disappointed Mr. Dark, by declining to act, in any way, on the information that he had collected for her, and by insisting that the whole affair should still be buried in the profoundest secrecy. For the first time since I had known my travelling companion, he became depressed in spirits on hearing that nothing more was to be done; and although he left the Hall with a handsome present, he left it discontentedly.

"Such a pretty case, William," says he, quite sorrowfully, as we shook hands. "Such an uncommonly

pretty case! It's a thousand pities to stop it, in this way, before it's half over."

"You don't know what a proud lady and what a delicate lady my mistress is," I answered. "She would die rather than expose her forlorn situation in a public court, for the sake of punishing her husband."

"Bless your simple heart," says Mr. Dark, "do you really think, now, that such a case as this can be hushed up?"

"Why not," I asked, "if we all keep the secret?"

"That for the secret!" cries Mr. Dark, snapping his fingers. "Your master will let the cat out of the bag, if nobody else does."

"My master!" I repeated, in amazement.

"Yes, your master," says Mr. Dark. "I have had some experience in my time, and I say you have not seen the last of him yet. Mark my words, William. Mr. James Smith will come back."

With that prophecy, Mr. Dark fretfully treated himself to a last pinch of snuff, and departed in dudgeon on his journey back to his master in London. His last words hung heavily on my mind for days after he had gone. It was some weeks before I got over a habit of starting whenever the bell was rung at the front door.

CHAPTER IV.

OUR life at the Hall soon returned to its old dreary course. The lawyer in London wrote to my mistress to ask her to come and stay for a little while with his wife. But she declined the invitation, being averse to facing company after what had happened to her. Though she tried hard to keep the real state of her mind concealed from all about her, I, for one, could see plainly enough that she was pining under the bitter injury that had been inflicted on her. What effect continued solitude might have had on her spirits, I tremble to think.

Fortunately for herself, it occurred to her, before long, to send and invite Mr. Meeke to resume his musical practising with her at the Hall. She told him — and, as it seemed to me, with perfect truth — that any implied engagement which he had made with Mr. James Smith was now cancelled, since the person so named had morally forfeited all his claims as a husband — first, by his desertion of her; and, secondly, by his criminal marriage with another woman. After stating this view of the matter, she left it to Mr. Meeke to decide whether the perfectly innocent connection between them should be resumed or not. The little parson, after hesitating and pondering, in his helpless way, ended by agreeing with my mistress, and by

coming back once more to the Hall with his fiddle under his arm. This renewal of their old habits might have been imprudent enough, as tending to weaken my mistress's case in the eyes of the world; but, for all that, it was the most sensible course she could take for her own sake. The harmless company of Mr. Meeke, and the relief of playing the old tunes again in the old way, saved her, I verily believe, from sinking altogether under the oppression of the shocking situation in which she was now placed.

So, with the assistance of Mr. Meeke and his fiddle, my mistress got through the weary time. The winter passed; the spring came; and no fresh tidings reached us of Mr. James Smith. It had been a long, hard winter that year, and the spring was backward and rainy. The first really fine day we had was the day that fell on the fourteenth of March.

I am particular in mentioning this date, merely because it is fixed for ever in my memory. As long as there is life in me, I shall remember that fourteenth of March, and the smallest circumstances connected with it.

The day began ill, with what superstitious people would think a bad omen. My mistress remained late in her room in the morning, amusing herself by looking over her clothes, and by setting to rights some drawers in her cabinet which she had not opened for some time past. Just before luncheon, we were startled by hearing the drawing-room bell rung violently. I ran up to see what was the matter, and the quadroon, Josephine,

who had heard the bell in another part of the house, hastened to answer it also. She got into the drawing-room first, and I followed close on her heels. My mistress was standing alone on the hearth-rug, with an appearance of great discomposure in her face and manner.

"I have been robbed!" she said, vehemently. "I don't know when or how. But I miss a pair of bracelets, three rings, and a quantity of old-fashioned lace pocket handkerchiefs."

"If you have any suspicions, ma'am," said Josephine, in a sharp, sudden way, "say who they point at. My boxes, for one, are quite at your disposal."

"Who asked you about your boxes?" said my mistress, angrily. "Be a little less ready with your answer, if you please, the next time I speak."

She then turned to me, and began explaining the circumstances under which she had discovered her loss. I suggested that the missing things should be well searched for first; and then, if nothing came of that, that I should go for the constable, and place the matter under his direction.

My mistress agreed to this plan, and the search was undertaken immediately. It lasted till dinner-time, and led to no results. I then proposed going for the constable. But my mistress said it was too late to do anything that day, and told me to wait at table as usual, and to go on my errand the first thing the next morning. Mr. Meeke was coming with some new music in the evening; and I suspect she was not

willing to be disturbed at her favourite occupation by the arrival of the constable.

When dinner was over, the parson came; and the concert went on as usual through the evening. At ten o'clock I took up the tray, with the wine and soda-water and biscuits. Just as I was opening one of the bottles of soda-water, there was a sound of wheels on the drive outside, and a ring at the bell.

I had unfastened the wires of the cork, and could not put the bottle down to run at once to the door. One of the female servants answered it. I heard a sort of half scream — then the sound of a footstep that was familiar to me.

My mistress turned round from the piano, and looked me hard in the face.

"William!" she said, "do you know that step?"

Before I could answer, the door was pushed open, and Mr. James Smith walked into the room.

He had his hat on. His long hair flowed down under it over the collar of his coat; his bright black eyes, after resting an instant on my mistress, turned to Mr. Meeke. His heavy eyebrows met together, and one of his hands went up to one of his bushy black whiskers, and pulled at it angrily.

"You here again!" he said, advancing a few steps toward the little parson, who sat trembling all over, with his fiddle hugged up in his arms, as if it had been a child.

Seeing her villainous husband advance, my mis-

tress moved too, so as to face him. He turned round on her at the first step she took, as quick as lightning.

"You shameless woman!" he said. "Can you look me in the face in the presence of that man?" He pointed, as he spoke, to Mr. Meeke.

My mistress never shrank when he turned upon her. Not a sign of fear was in her face when they confronted each other. Not the faintest flush of anger came into her cheeks when he spoke. The sense of the insult and injury that he had inflicted on her, and the consciousness of knowing his guilty secret, gave her all her self-possession at that trying moment.

"I ask you again," he repeated, finding that she did not answer him. "How dare you look me in the face in the presence of that man?"

She raised her steady eyes to his hat, which he still kept on his head.

"Who has taught you to come into a room and speak to a lady with your hat on?" she asked, in quiet, contemptuous tones. "Is that a habit which is sanctioned by *your new wife*?"

My eyes were on him as she said those last words. His complexion, naturally dark and swarthy, changed instantly to a livid yellow white; his hand caught at the chair nearest to him; and he dropped into it heavily.

"I don't understand you," he said, after a moment of silence, looking about the room unsteadily while he spoke.

"You do," said my mistress. "Your tongue lies, but your face speaks the truth."

He called back his courage and audacity by a desperate effort, and started up from the chair again with an oath.

The instant before this happened, I thought I heard the sound of a rustling dress in the passage outside, as if one of the women servants was stealing up to listen outside the door. I should have gone at once to see whether this was the case or not, but my master stopped me just after he had risen from the chair.

"Get the bed made in the Red Room, and light a fire there directly," he said, with his fiercest look and in his roughest tones. "When I ring the bell, bring me a kettle of boiling water and a bottle of brandy. As for you," he continued, turning towards Mr. Meeke, who still sat pale and speechless, with his fiddle hugged up in his arms, "leave the house, or you won't find your cloth any protection to you."

At this insult the blood flew into my mistress's face. Before she could say anything, Mr. James Smith raised his voice loud enough to drown hers.

"I won't hear another word from you," he cried out, brutally. "You have been talking like a mad woman, and you look like a mad woman. You are out of your senses. As sure as you live, I'll have you examined by the doctors to-morrow. Why the devil do you stand there, you scoundrel?" he roared,

wheeling round on his heel to me. "Why don't you obey my orders?"

I looked at my mistress. If she had directed me to knock Mr. James Smith down, big as he was, I think at that moment I could have done it.

"Do as he tells you, William," she said, squeezing one of her hands firmly over her bosom, as if she was trying to keep down the rising indignation in that way. "This is the last order of his giving that I shall ask you to obey."

"Do you threaten me, you mad —?"

He finished the question by a word I shall not repeat.

"I tell you," she answered, in clear, ringing, resolute tones, "that you have outraged me past all forgiveness, and all endurance, and that you shall never insult me again as you have insulted me to-night."

After saying those words, she fixed one steady look on him, then turned away, and walked slowly to the door.

A minute previously, Mr. Meeke had summoned courage enough to get up and leave the room quietly. I noticed him walking demurely away, close to the wall, with his fiddle held under one tail of his long frock coat, as if he was afraid that the savage passions of Mr. James Smith might be wreaked on that unoffending instrument. He got to the door before my mistress. As he softly pulled it open, I saw him start, and the

rustling of the gown caught my ear again from outside.

My mistress followed him into the passage, turning, however, in the opposite direction to that taken by the little parson, in order to reach the staircase that led to her own room. I went out next, leaving Mr. James Smith alone.

I overtook Mr. Meeke in the hall, and opened the door for him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I said, "but did you come upon anybody listening outside the music-room when you left it just now?"

"Yes, William," said Mr. Meeke, in a faint voice—"I think it was Josephine. But I was so dreadfully agitated that I can't be quite certain about it."

Had she surprised our secret? That was the question I asked myself, as I went away to light the fire in the Red Room. Calling to mind the exact time at which I had first detected the rustling outside the door, I came to the conclusion that she had only heard the last part of the quarrel between my mistress and her rascal of a husband. Those bold words about the "new wife" had been assuredly spoken before I heard Josephine stealing up to the door.

As soon as the fire was alight and the bed made, I went back to the music-room to announce that my orders had been obeyed. Mr. James Smith was walking up and down in a perturbed way, still keeping his hat on. He followed me to the Red Room without saying a word.

Ten minutes later, he rang for the kettle and the bottle of brandy. When I took them in, I found him unpacking a small carpet-bag, which was the only luggage he had brought with him. He still kept silence, and did not appear to take any notice of me. I left him immediately, without our having so much as exchanged a single word.

So far as I could tell, the night passed quietly.

The next morning I heard that my mistress was suffering so severely from a nervous attack that she was unable to rise from her bed. It was no surprise to me to be told that, knowing, as I did, what she had gone through the night before.

About nine o'clock I went with the hot water to the Red Room. After knocking twice, I tried the door, and, finding it not locked, went in with the jug in my hand.

I looked at the bed; I looked all round the room. Not a sign of Mr. James Smith was to be seen anywhere.

Judging by appearances, the bed had certainly been occupied. Thrown across the counterpane lay the night-gown he had worn. I took it up, and saw some spots on it. I looked at them a little closer. They were spots of blood.

CHAPTER V.

THE first amazement and alarm produced by this discovery deprived me of my presence of mind. Without stopping to think what I ought to do first, I ran back to the servants' hall, calling out that something had happened to my master.

All the household hurried directly into the Red Room, Josephine among the rest. I was first brought to my senses, as it were, by observing the strange expression of her countenance when she saw the bed-gown and the empty room. All the other servants were bewildered and frightened. She alone, after giving a little start, recovered herself directly. A look of devilish satisfaction broke out on her face; and she left the room quickly and quietly, without exchanging a word with any of us. I saw this, and it aroused my suspicions. There is no need to mention what they were; for, as events soon showed, they were entirely wide of the mark.

Having come to myself a little, I sent them all out of the room, except the coachman. We two then examined the place.

The Red Room was usually occupied by visitors. It was on the ground floor, and looked out into the garden. We found the window-shutters, which I had barred overnight, open, but the window itself was down

The fire had been out long enough for the grate to be quite cold. Half the bottle of brandy had been drunk. The carpet-bag was gone. There were no marks of violence or struggling anywhere about the bed or the room. We examined every corner carefully, but made no other discoveries than these.

When I returned to the servants' hall, bad news of my mistress was awaiting me there. The unusual noise and confusion in the house had reached her ears, and she had been told what had happened, without sufficient caution being exercised in preparing her to hear it. In her weak, nervous state, the shock of the intelligence had quite prostrated her. She had fallen into a swoon, and had been brought back to her senses with the greatest difficulty. As to giving me or anybody else directions what to do, under the embarrassing circumstances which had now occurred, she was totally incapable of the effort.

I waited till the middle of the day, in the hope that she might get strong enough to give her orders; but no message came from her. At last I resolved to send and ask her what she thought it best to do. Josephine was the proper person to go on this errand; but when I asked for Josephine, she was nowhere to be found. The housemaid, who had searched for her ineffectually, brought word that her bonnet and shawl were not hanging in their usual places. The parlour-maid, who had been in attendance in my mistress's room, came down while we were all aghast at this new disappearance. She could only tell us that Josephine

had begged her to do lady's-maid's duty that morning, as she was not well. Not well! And the first result of her illness appeared to be that she had left the house!

I cautioned the servants on no account to mention this circumstance to my mistress, and then went upstairs myself to knock at her door. My object was to ask if I might count on her approval if I wrote in her name to the lawyer in London, and if I afterwards went and gave information of what had occurred to the nearest justice of the peace. I might have sent to make this inquiry through one of the female servants; but by this time, though not naturally suspicious, I had got to distrust everybody in the house, whether they deserved it or not.

So I asked the question myself, standing outside the door. My mistress thanked me in a faint voice, and begged me to do what I had proposed immediately.

I went into my own bedroom and wrote to the lawyer, merely telling him that Mr. James Smith had appeared unexpectedly at the Hall, and that events had occurred in consequence which required his immediate presence. I made the letter up like a parcel, and sent the coachman with it to catch the mail on its way through to London.

The next thing was to go to the justice of the peace. The nearest lived about five miles off, and was well acquainted with my mistress. He was an old bachelor, and he kept house with his brother, who was a widower. The two were much respected and

beloved in the county, being kind, unaffected gentlemen who did a great deal of good among the poor. The justice was Mr. Robert Nicholson, and his brother, the widower, was Mr. Philip.

I had got my hat on, and was asking the groom which horse I had better take, when an open carriage drove up to the house. It contained Mr. Philip Nicholson and two persons in plain clothes, not exactly servants, and not exactly gentlemen, as far as I could judge. Mr. Philip looked at me, when I touched my hat to him, in a very grave, downcast way, and asked for my mistress. I told him she was ill in bed. He shook his head at hearing that, and said he wished to speak to me in private. I showed him into the library. One of the men in plain clothes followed us, and sat in the hall. The other waited with the carriage.

"I was just going out, sir," I said, as I set a chair for him, "to speak to Mr. Robert Nicholson about a very extraordinary circumstance—"

"I know what you refer to," said Mr. Philip, cutting me short rather abruptly; "and I must beg, for reasons which will presently appear, that you will make no statement of any sort to me until you have first heard what I have to say. I am here on a very serious and a very shocking errand, which deeply concerns your mistress and you."

His face suggested something worse than his words expressed. My heart began to beat fast, and I felt that I was turning pale.

"Your master, Mr. James Smith," he went on,

"came here unexpectedly, yesterday evening, and slept in this house last night. Before he retired to rest, he and your mistress had high words together, which ended, I am sorry to hear, in a threat of a serious nature addressed by Mrs. James Smith to her husband. They slept in separate rooms. This morning you went into your master's room and saw no sign of him there. You only found his night-gown on the bed, spotted with blood."

"Yes, sir," I said, in as steady a voice as I could command. "Quite true."

"I am not examining you," said Mr. Philip. "I am only making a certain statement, the truth of which you can admit or deny before my brother."

"Before your brother, sir!" I repeated. "Am I suspected of anything wrong?"

"There is a suspicion that Mr. James Smith has been murdered," was the answer I received to that question.

My flesh began to creep all over from head to foot.

"I am shocked, I am horrified to say," Mr. Philip went on, "that the suspicion affects your mistress, in the first place, and you in the second."

I shall not attempt to describe what I felt when he said that. No words of mine, no words of anybody's could give an idea of it. What other men would have done in my situation, I don't know. I stood before Mr. Philip, staring straight at him, without speaking, without moving, almost without breathing. If he, or

any other man, had struck me at that moment, I do not believe I should have felt the blow.

"Both my brother and myself," said Mr. Philip, "have such unfeigned respect for your mistress, such sympathy for her under these frightful circumstances, and such an implicit belief in her capability of proving her innocence, that we are desirous of sparing her in this dreadful emergency as much as possible. For those reasons, I have undertaken to come here with the persons appointed to execute my brother's warrant —"

"Warrant, sir!" I said, getting command of my voice as he pronounced that word. "A warrant against my mistress!"

"Against her and against you," said Mr. Philip. "The suspicious circumstances have been sworn to by a competent witness, who has declared on oath that your mistress is guilty, and that you are an accomplice."

"What witness, sir?"

"Your mistress's quadroon maid, who came to my brother this morning, and who has made her deposition in due form."

"And who is as false as hell," I cried out passionately, "in every word she says against my mistress and against me."

"I hope — no, I will go further, and say, I believe she is false," said Mr. Philip. "But her perjury must be proved, and the necessary examination must take place. My carriage is going back to my brother's,

and you will go in it, in charge of one of my men, who has the warrant to take you into custody. I shall remain here with the man who is waiting in the hall; and before any steps are taken to execute the other warrant, I shall send for the doctor to ascertain when your mistress can be removed."

"Oh, my poor mistress!" I said, "this will be the death of her, sir."

"I will take care that the shock shall strike her as tenderly as possible," said Mr. Philip. "I am here for that express purpose. She has my deepest sympathy and respect, and shall have every help and alleviation that I can afford her."

The hearing him say that, and the seeing how sincerely he meant what he said, was the first gleam of comfort in the dreadful affliction that had befallen us. I felt this; I felt a burning anger against the wretch who had done her best to ruin my mistress's fair name and mine; but in every other respect, I was like a man who had been stunned, and whose faculties had not perfectly recovered from the shock. Mr. Philip was obliged to remind me that time was of importance, and that I had better give myself up immediately, on the merciful terms which his kindness offered to me. I acknowledged that, and wished him good morning. But a mist seemed to come over my eyes as I turned round to go away; a mist that prevented me from finding my way to the door. Mr. Philip opened it for me, and said a friendly word or two, which I could hardly hear. The man waiting outside took me to his

companion in the carriage at the door, and I was driven away — a prisoner for the first time in my life.

On our way to the Justice's, what little thinking faculty I had left in me, was all occupied in the attempt to trace a motive for the inconceivable treachery and falsehood of which Josephine had been guilty.

Her words, her looks, and her manner, on that unfortunate day when my mistress so far forgot herself as to strike her, came back dimly to my memory, and led to the inference that part of the motive, at least, of which I was in search, might be referred to what had happened on that occasion. But was this the only reason for her devilish vengeance against my mistress? And, even if it were so, what fancied injuries had I done her? Why should I be included in the false accusation? In the dazed state of my faculties, at that time, I was quite incapable of seeking the answer to these questions. My mind was clouded all over, and I gave up the attempt to clear it in despair.

I was brought before Mr. Robert Nicholson that day, and the fiend of a quadroon was examined in my presence. The first sight of her face — with its wicked self-possession, with its smooth, leering triumph — so sickened me that I turned my head away, and never looked at her a second time throughout the proceedings. The answers she gave amounted to a mere repetition of the deposition to which she had already sworn. I listened to her with the most breathless attention, and was thunderstruck at the inconceivable

artfulness with which she had mixed up truth and falsehood in her charge against my mistress and me.

— This was, in substance, what she now stated in my presence: —

After describing the manner of Mr. James Smith's arrival at the hall, the witness, Josephine Durand, confessed that she had been led to listen at the music-room door, by hearing angry voices inside; and she then described, truly enough, the latter part of the altercation between husband and wife. Fearing, after this, that something serious might happen, she had kept watch in her room, which was on the same floor as her mistress's. She had heard her mistress's door open softly, between one and two in the morning — had followed her mistress, who carried a small lamp, along the passage and down the stairs into the hall — had hidden herself in the porter's chair — had seen her mistress take a dagger in a green sheath from a collection of Eastern curiosities kept in the hall — had followed her again, and seen her softly enter the Red Room — had heard the heavy breathing of Mr. James Smith, which gave token that he was asleep — had slipped into an empty room, next door to the Red Room, and had waited there about a quarter of an hour, when her mistress came out again with the dagger in her hand — had followed her mistress again into the hall, where she had put the dagger back into its place — had seen her mistress turn into a side passage that led to my room — had heard her knock at my door, and heard me answer and open it — had hidden

again in the porter's chair — had, after a while, seen me and my mistress pass together into the passage that led to the Red Room — had watched us both into the Red Room — and had then, through fear of being discovered and murdered herself, if she risked detection any longer, stolen back to her own room for the rest of the night.

After deposing, on oath, to the truth of these atrocious falsehoods, and declaring, in conclusion, that Mr. James Smith had been murdered by my mistress, and that I was an accomplice, the quadroon had further asserted, in order to show a motive for the crime, that Mr. Meeke was my mistress's lover, that he had been forbidden the house by her husband, and that he was found in the house, and alone with her, on the evening of Mr. James Smith's return. Here again, there were some grains of truth cunningly mixed up with a revolting lie, and they had their effect in giving to the falsehood a look of probability.

I was cautioned in the usual manner, and asked if I had anything to say.

I replied that I was innocent, but that I would wait for legal assistance before I defended myself. The Justice remanded me; and the examination was over. Three days later, my unhappy mistress was subjected to the same trial. I was not allowed to communicate with her. All I knew was that the lawyer had arrived from London to help her. Towards the evening, he was admitted to see me. He shook his head sorrowfully when I asked after my mistress.

"I am afraid," he said, "that she has sunk under the horror of the situation in which that vile woman has placed her. Weakened by her previous agitation, she seems to have given way under this last shock, tenderly and carefully as Mr. Philip Nicholson broke the bad news to her. All her feelings appeared to be strangely blunted at the examination to-day. She answered the questions put to her quite correctly, but, at the same time, quite mechanically, with no change in her complexion, or in her tone of voice, or in her manner from beginning to end. It is a sad thing, William, when women cannot get their natural vent of weeping, and your mistress has not shed a tear since she left Darrock Hall."

"But surely, sir," I said, "if my examination has not proved Josephine's perjury, my mistress's examination must have exposed it?"

"Nothing will expose it," answered the lawyer, "but producing Mr. James Smith, or, at least, legally proving that he is alive. Morally speaking, I have no doubt that the Justice before whom you have been examined is as firmly convinced as we can be, that the quadroon has perjured herself. Morally speaking, he believes that those threats which your mistress unfortunately used, referred (as she said they did, to-day) to her intention of leaving the Hall early in the morning, with you for her attendant, and coming to me, if she had been well enough to travel, to seek effectual legal protection from her husband for the future. Mr. Nicholson believes that; and I, who know more of the

circumstances than he does, believe also that Mr. James Smith stole away from Darrock Hall in the night under fear of being indicted for bigamy. But if I can't find him, if I can't prove him to be alive, if I can't account for those spots of blood on the night gown, the accidental circumstances of the case remain unexplained — your mistress's rash language, the bad terms on which she has lived with her husband, and her unlucky disregard of appearances in keeping up her intercourse with Mr. Meeke, all tell dead against us — and the Justice has no alternative, in a legal point of view, but to remand you both, as he has now done, for the production of further evidence."

"But how, then, in heaven's name, is our innocence to be proved, sir?" I asked.

"In the first place," said the lawyer, "by finding Mr. James Smith; and, in the second place, by persuading him, when he is found, to come forward and declare himself."

"Do you really believe, sir," said I, "that he would hesitate to do that, when he knows the horrible charge to which his disappearance has exposed his wife? He is a heartless villain, I know; but surely —"

"I don't suppose," said the lawyer, cutting me short, "that he is quite scoundrel enough to decline coming forward, supposing he ran no risk by doing so. But remember that he has placed himself in a position to be tried for bigamy, and that he believes your mistress will put the law in force against him."

I had forgotten that circumstance. My heart sank

within me when it was recalled to my memory, and I could say nothing more.

"It is a very serious thing," the lawyer went on; "it is a downright offence against the law of the land to make any private offer of a compromise to this man. Knowing what we know, our duty as good citizens is to give such information as may bring him to trial. I tell you plainly that, if I did not stand towards your mistress in the position of a relation, as well as a legal adviser, I should think twice about running the risk — the very serious risk — on which I am now about to venture for her sake. As it is, I have taken the right measures to assure Mr. James Smith that he will not be treated according to his deserts. When he knows what the circumstances are, he will trust us — supposing always that we can find him. The search about this neighbourhood has been quite useless. I have sent private instructions by today's post to Mr. Dark in London, and with them a carefully-worded form of advertisement for the public newspapers. You may rest assured that every human means of tracing him will be tried forthwith. In the meantime, I have an important question to put to you about Josephine. She may know more than we think she does; she may have surprised the secret of the second marriage, and may be keeping it in reserve to use against us. If this should turn out to be the case, I shall want some other chance against her besides the chance of indicting her for perjury. As to her motive now for making this horrible accusation, what can you tell me about that, William?"

"Her motive against me, sir?"

"No, no, not against you. I can see plainly enough that she accuses you because it is necessary to do so to add to the probability of her story — which, of course, assumes that you helped your mistress to dispose of the dead body. You are coolly sacrificed to some devilish vengeance against her mistress. Let us get at that first. Has there ever been a quarrel between them?"

I told him of the quarrel, and of how Josephine had looked and talked when she showed me her cheek.

"Yes," he said, "that is a strong motive for revenge with a naturally pitiless, vindictive woman. But is that all? Had your mistress any hold over her? Is there any self-interest mixed up along with this motive of vengeance? Think a little, William. Has anything ever happened in the house to compromise this woman, or to make her fancy herself compromised?"

The remembrance of my mistress's lost trinkets and handkerchiefs, which later and greater troubles had put out of my mind, flashed back into my memory while he spoke. I told him immediately of the alarm in the house when the loss was discovered.

"Did your mistress suspect Josephine and question her?" he asked, eagerly.

"No, sir," I replied. "Before she could say a word, Josephine impudently asked who she suspected, and boldly offered her own boxes to be searched."

The lawyer's face turned red as scarlet. He jumped

out of his chair, and hit me such a smack on the shoulder, that I thought he had gone mad.

"By Jupiter!" he cried out, "we have got the whip hand of that she-devil at last."

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Why, man alive," he said, "don't you see how it is? Josephine's the thief! I am as sure of it as that you and I are talking together. This vile accusation against your mistress answers another purpose besides the vindictive one — it is the very best screen that the wretch could possibly set up to hide herself from detection. It has stopped your mistress and you from moving in the matter; it exhibits her in the false character of an honest witness against a couple of criminals; it gives her time to dispose of the goods, or to hide them, or to do anything she likes with them. Stop! let me be quite sure that I know what the lost things are. A pair of bracelets, three rings, and a lot of lace pocket handkerchiefs — is that what you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your mistress will describe them particularly, and I will take the right steps the first thing to-morrow morning. Good-evening, William, and keep up your spirits. It shan't be my fault if you don't soon see the quadroon in the right place for her — at the prisoner's bar."

With that farewell he went out.

The days passed, and I did not see him again until the period of my remand had expired. On this occasion, when I once more appeared before the Justice, my mistress appeared with me. The first sight of her

absolutely startled me — she was so sadly altered. Her face looked so pinched and thin that it was like the face of an old woman. The dull, vacant resignation of her expression was something shocking to see. It changed a little when her eyes first turned heavily towards me; and she whispered, with a faint smile, "I am sorry for you, William: I am very, very sorry for you." But as soon as she had said those words, the blank look returned, and she sat with her head drooping forward, quiet and inattentive and hopeless — so changed a being that her oldest friends would hardly have known her.

Our examination was a mere formality. There was no additional evidence, either for or against us, and we were remanded again for another week.

I asked the lawyer, privately, if any chance had offered itself of tracing Mr. James Smith. He looked mysterious, and only said in answer, "Hope for the best." I inquired, next, if any progress had been made toward fixing the guilt of the robbery on Josephine.

"I never boast," he replied. "But, cunning as she is, I should not be surprised if Mr. Dark and I, together, turned out to be more than a match for her."

Mr. Dark! There was something in the mere mention of his name that gave me confidence in the future. If I could only have got my poor mistress's sad dazed face out of my mind, I should not have had much depression of spirits to complain of during the interval of time that elapsed between the second examination and the third. •

CHAPTER VI.

ON the third appearance of my mistress and myself before the Justice, I noticed some faces in the room which I had not seen there before. Greatly to my astonishment — for the previous examinations had been conducted as privately as possible — I remarked the presence of two of the servants from the Hall, and of three or four of the tenants on the Darrock estate, who lived nearest to the house. They all sat together on one side of the justice-room. Opposite to them, and close at the side of a door, stood my old acquaintance, Mr. Dark, with his big snuff-box, his jolly face, and his winking eye. He nodded to me, when I looked at him, as jauntily as if we were meeting at a party of pleasure. The quadroon woman, who had been summoned to the examination, had a chair placed opposite to the witness-box, and in a line with the seat occupied by my poor mistress, whose looks, as I was grieved to see, were not altered for the better. The lawyer from London was with her, and I stood behind her chair.

We were all quietly disposed in the room in this way, when the Justice, Mr. Robert Nicholson, came in with his brother. It might have been only fancy, but I thought I could see in both their faces* that some-

thing remarkable had happened since we had met at the last examination.

The deposition of Josephine Durand was read over by the clerk, and she was asked if she had anything to add to it. She replied in the negative. The Justice then appealed to my mistress's relation, the lawyer, to know if he could produce any evidence relating to the charge against his clients.

"I have evidence," answered the lawyer, getting briskly on his legs, "which, I believe, sir, will justify me in asking for their discharge."

"Where are your witnesses?" inquired the Justice, looking hard at Josephine while he spoke.

"One of them is in waiting, your worship," said Mr. Dark, opening the door near which he was standing.

He went out of the room, remained away about a minute, and returned with his witness at his heels.

My heart gave a bound as if it would jump out of my body. There, with his long hair cut short, and his bushy whiskers shaved off, — there, in his own proper person, safe and sound as ever, was Mr. James Smith!

The quadroon's iron nature resisted the shock of his unexpected presence on the scene with a steadiness that was nothing short of marvellous. Her thin lips closed together convulsively, and there was a slight movement in the muscles of her throat. But not a

word, not a sign, betrayed her. Even the yellow tinge of her complexion remained unchanged.

"It is not necessary, sir, that I should waste time and words in referring to the wicked and preposterous charge against my clients," said the lawyer, addressing Mr. Robert Nicholson. "The one sufficient justification for discharging them immediately is before you at this moment, in the person of that gentleman. There, sir, stands the murdered Mr. James Smith, of Darrock Hall, alive and well, to answer for himself."

"That is not the man!" cried Josephine, her shrill voice just as high, clear, and steady as ever. "I denounce that man as an impostor! Of my own knowledge I deny that he is Mr. James Smith!"

"No doubt you do," said the lawyer; "but we will prove his identity for all that."

The first witness called was Mr. Philip Nicholson. He could swear that he had seen Mr. James Smith, and spoken to him, at least a dozen times. The person now before him was Mr. James Smith, altered as to personal appearance, by having his hair cut short, and his whiskers shaved off, but still unmistakably the man he assumed to be.

"Conspiracy!" interrupted the quadroon, hissing the word out viciously between her teeth.

"If you are not silent," said Mr. Robert Nicholson, "you will be removed from the room. It will sooner meet the ends of justice," he went on, addressing the lawyer, "if you prove the question of identity by

witnesses who have been in habits of daily communication with Mr. James Smith."

Upon this, one of the servants from the Hall was placed in the box.

The alteration in his master's appearance evidently puzzled the man. Besides the perplexing change already adverted to, there was also a change in Mr. James Smith's expression and manner. Rascal as he was, I must do him the justice to say that he looked startled and ashamed when he first caught sight of his unfortunate wife. The servant, who was used to be eyed tyrannically by him, and ordered about roughly, seeing him now for the first time abashed and silent, stammered and hesitated on being asked to swear to his identity.

"I can hardly say for certain, sir," said the man, addressing the Justice in a bewildered manner. "He is like my master, and yet he isn't. If he wore whiskers and had his hair long, and if he was, saving your presence, sir, a little more rough and ready in his way, I could swear to him anywhere with a safe conscience."

Fortunately for us, at this moment Mr. James Smith's feeling of uneasiness at the situation in which he was placed, changed to a feeling of irritation at being coolly surveyed and then stupidly doubted in the matter of his identity by one of his own servants.

"Can't you say in plain words, you idiot, whether you know me, or whether you don't?" he called out, angrily.

"That's his voice!" cried the servant, starting in the box. "Whiskers or no whiskers, that's him!"

"If there is any difficulty, your worship, about the gentleman's hair," said Mr. Dark, coming forward with a grin, "here's a small parcel which, I may make so bold as to say, will remove it." Saying that, he opened the parcel, took some locks of hair out of it, and held them up close to Mr. James Smith's head. "A pretty good match, your worship," continued Mr. Dark. "I have no doubt the gentleman's head feels cooler now it's off. We can't put the whiskers on, I'm afraid, but they match the hair; and there they are in the paper (if one may say such a thing of whiskers) to speak for themselves."

"Lies! lies! lies!" screamed Josephine, losing her wicked self-control at this stage of the proceedings.

The Justice made a sign to two of the constables present, as she burst out with those exclamations, and the men removed her to an adjoining room.

The second servant from the Hall was then put in the box, and was followed by one of the tenants. After what they had heard and seen, neither of these men had any hesitation in swearing positively to their master's identity.

"It is quite unnecessary," said the Justice, as soon as the box was empty again, "to examine any more witnesses as to the question of identity. All the legal formalities are accomplished, and the charge against the prisoners falls to the ground. I have great plea-

sure in ordering the immediate discharge of both the accused persons, and in declaring from this place that they leave the court without the slightest stain on their characters."

He bowed low to my mistress as he said that, paused a moment, and then looked inquiringly at Mr. James Smith.

"I have hitherto abstained from making any remark unconnected with the immediate matter in hand," he went on. "But now that my duty is done, I cannot leave this chair without expressing my strong sense of disapprobation of the conduct of Mr. James Smith — conduct which, whatever may be the motives that occasioned it, has given a false colour of probability to a most horrible charge against a lady of unspotted reputation, and against a person in a lower rank of life, whose good character ought not to have been imperilled, even for a moment. Mr. Smith may or may not choose to explain his mysterious disappearance from Darrock Hall, and the equally unaccountable change which he has chosen to make in his personal appearance. There is no legal charge against him; but, speaking morally, I should be unworthy of the place I hold if I hesitated to declare my present conviction that his conduct has been deceitful, inconsiderate, and unfeeling, in the highest degree."

To this sharp reprimand, Mr. James Smith (evidently tutored beforehand as to what he was to say) replied that, in attending before the Justice, he wished to perform a plain duty and to keep himself strictly

within the letter of the law. He apprehended that the only legal obligation laid on him was to attend in that court to declare himself, and to enable competent witnesses to prove his identity. This duty accomplished, he had merely to add that he preferred submitting to a reprimand from the Bench to entering into explanations which would involve the disclosure of domestic circumstances of a very unhappy nature. After that brief reply, he had nothing further to say; and he would respectfully request the Justice's permission to withdraw.

The permission was accorded. As he crossed the room, he stopped near his wife, and said confusedly, in a very low tone —

"I have done you many injuries, but I never intended this. I am sorry for it. Have you anything to say to me before I go?"

My mistress shuddered and hid her face. He waited a moment, and, finding that she did not answer him, bowed his head politely, and went out. I did not know it then, but I had seen him for the last time.

After he had gone, the lawyer, addressing Mr. Robert Nicholson, said that he had an application to make, in reference to the woman Josephine Durand.

At the mention of that name, my mistress hurriedly whispered a few words into her relation's ear. He looked towards Mr. Philip Nicholson, who immediately advanced, offered his arm to my mistress, and led her

out. I was about to follow, when Mr. Dark stopped me, and begged that I would wait a few minutes longer, in order to give myself the pleasure of seeing "the end of the case."

In the meantime, the Justice had pronounced the necessary order to have the quadroom brought back. She came in, as bold and confident as ever. Mr. Robert Nicholson looked away from her in disgust, and said to the lawyer —

"Your application is to have her committed for perjury, of course?"

"For perjury?" said Josephine, with her wicked smile. "Very good! I shall explain some little matters that I have not explained before. You think I am quite at your mercy now? Bah! I shall make myself a thorn in your sides, yet."

"She has got scent of the second marriage," whispered Mr. Dark to me.

There could be no doubt of it. She had evidently been listening at the door, on the night when my master came back, longer than I had supposed. She must have heard those words about "the new wife" — she might even have seen the effect of them on Mr. James Smith.

"We do not, at present, propose to charge Josephine Durand with perjury," said the lawyer, "but with another offence, for which it is important to try her immediately, in order to effect the restoration of property that has been stolen. I charge her with stealing

from her mistress, while in her service at Darrock Hall, a pair of bracelets, three rings, and a dozen and a half of lace pocket-handkerchiefs. The articles in question were taken this morning from between the mattresses of her bed; and a letter was found in the same place, which clearly proves that she had represented the property as belonging to herself, and that she had tried to dispose of it to a purchaser in London." While he was speaking, Mr. Dark produced the jewellery, the handkerchiefs, and the letter, and laid them before the Justice.

Even Josephine's extraordinary powers of self-control now gave way at last. At the first words of the unexpected charge against her, she struck her hands together violently, gnashed her sharp white teeth, and burst out with a torrent of fierce sounding words in some foreign language, the meaning of which I did not understand then, and cannot explain now.

"I think that's check-mate for Marmzelle," whispered Mr. Dark, with his invariable wink. "Suppose you go back to the Hall, now, William, and draw a jug of that very remarkable old ale of yours? I'll be after you in five minutes, as soon as the charge is made out."

I could hardly realise it, when I found myself walking back to Darrock a free man again.

In a quarter of an hour's time Mr. Dark joined me, and drank to my health, happiness, and prosperity, in three separate tumblers. After performing this ceremony, he wagged his head and chuckled with an ap-

pearance of such excessive enjoyment that I could not avoid remarking on his high spirits.

"It's the Case, William; it's the beautiful neatness of the Case that quite intoxicates me. Oh, Lord, what a happiness it is to be concerned in such a job as this!" cries Mr. Dark, slapping his stumpy hands on his fat knees in a sort of ecstasy.

I had a very different opinion of the case, for my own part, but I did not venture on expressing it. I was too anxious to know how Mr. James Smith had been discovered and produced at the examination, to enter into any arguments. Mr. Dark guessed what was passing in my mind, and telling me to sit down and make myself comfortable, volunteered of his own accord to inform me of all that I wanted to know.

"When I got my instructions and my statement of particulars," he began, "I was not at all surprised to hear that Mr. James Smith had come back (I prophesied that, if you remember, William, the last time we met). But I was a good deal astonished, nevertheless, at the turn things had taken; and I can't say I felt very hopeful about finding our man. However, I followed my master's directions, and put the advertisement in the papers. It addressed Mr. James Smith by name; but it was very carefully worded as to what was wanted of him. Two days after it appeared, a letter came to our office in a woman's handwriting. It was my business to open the letters, and I opened that. The writer was short and mysterious; she requested that somebody would call from our office, at a certain

address, between the hours of two and four that afternoon, in reference to the advertisement which we had inserted in the newspapers. Of course I was the somebody who went. I kept myself from building up hopes by the way, knowing what a lot of Mr. James Smiths there were in London. On getting to the house, I was shown into the drawing-room; and there, dressed in a wrapper and lying on a sofa, was an uncommonly pretty woman, who looked as if she was just recovering from an illness. She had a newspaper by her side, and came to the point at once: 'My husband's name is James Smith,' she says, 'and I have my reasons for wanting to know if he is the person you are in search of.' I described our man as Mr. James Smith of Darrock Hall, Cumberland. 'I know no such person,' says she —"

"What! was it not the second wife, after all?" I broke out.

"Wait a bit," says Mr. Dark. "I mentioned the name of the yacht next, and she started up on the sofa as if she had been shot. 'I think you were married in Scotland, ma'am?' says I. She turns as pale as ashes, and drops back on the sofa, and says, faintly, 'It is my husband. Oh, sir, what has happened? What do you want with him? Is he in debt?' I took a minute to think, and then made up my mind to tell her everything — feeling that she would keep her husband (as she called him) out of the way, if I frightened her by any mysteries. A nice job I had, William, as you may suppose, when she knew about

the bigamy business. What with screaming, fainting, crying, and blowing me up (as if *I* was to blame!) she kept me by that sofa of hers the best part of an hour — kept me there, in short, till Mr. James Smith himself came back. I leave you to judge if that mended matters. He found me mopping the poor woman's temples with scent and water; and he would have pitched me out of the window, as sure as I sit here, if I had not met him and staggered him at once with the charge of murder against his wife. That stopped him, when he was in full cry, I can promise you. 'Go and wait in the next room,' says he, 'and I'll come in and speak to you directly.'"

"And did you go?" I asked.

"Of course I did," says Mr. Dark. "I knew he couldn't get out by the drawing-room windows, and I knew I could watch the door; so away I went, leaving him alone with the lady, who didn't spare him, by any manner of means, as I could easily hear in the next room. However, all rows in this world come to an end sooner or later; and a man with any brains in his head may do what he pleases with a woman who is fond of him. Before long I heard her crying and kissing him. 'I can't go home,' she says, after this. 'You have behaved like a villain and a monster to me — but oh, Jemmy, I can't give you up to anybody. Don't go back to your wife! Oh, don't, don't go back to your wife!' 'No fear of that,' says he. 'My wife wouldn't have me if I did go back to her.' After that I heard the door open and went out to meet him on

the landing. He began swearing the moment he saw me, as if that was any good. 'Business first, if you please, sir,' says I, 'and any pleasure you like, in the way of swearing, afterwards.' With that beginning I mentioned our terms to him, and asked the pleasure of his company to Cumberland in return. He was uncommonly suspicious at first, but I promised to draw out a legal document (mere waste paper, of no earthly use except to pacify him), engaging to hold him harmless throughout the proceedings; and what with that, and telling him of the frightful danger his wife was in, I managed, at last, to carry my point."

"But did the second wife make no objection to his going away with you?" I inquired.

"Not she," said Mr. Dark. "I stated the case to her, just as it stood; and soon satisfied her that there was no danger of Mr. James Smith's first wife laying any claim to him. After hearing that, she joined me in persuading him to do his duty, and said she pitied your mistress from the bottom of her heart. With her influence to back me, I had no great fear of our man changing his mind. I had the door watched that night, however, so as to make quite sure of him. The next morning he was ready to time when I called; and a quarter of an hour after that, we were off together for the north road. We made the journey with post-horses, being afraid of chance passengers, you know, in public conveyances. On the way down, Mr. James Smith and I got on as comfortably together as if we had been a pair of old friends. I told the story of our tracing

him to the north of Scotland; and he gave me the particulars, in return, of his bolting from Darrock Hall. They are rather amusing, William — would you like to hear them?"

I told Mr. Dark that he had anticipated the very question I was about to ask him.

"Well," he said, "this is how it was: — To begin at the beginning, our man really took Mrs. Smith, Number Two, to the Mediterranean, as we heard. He sailed up the Spanish coast, and, after short trips ashore, stopped at a seaside place in France, called Cannes. There he saw a house and grounds to be sold, which took his fancy as a nice retired place to keep Number Two in. Nothing particular was wanted but the money to buy it; and, not having the little amount in his own possession, Mr. James Smith makes a virtue of necessity, and goes back overland to his wife, with private designs on her purse-strings. Number Two, who objects to be left behind, goes with him as far as London. There he trumps up the first story that comes into his head, about rents in the country, and a house in Lincolnshire that is too damp for her to trust herself in; and so, leaving her for a few days in London, starts boldly for Darrock Hall. His notion was to wheedle your mistress out of the money by good behaviour; but it seems he started badly by quarrelling with her about a fiddle-playing parson —"

"Yes, yes, I know all about that part of the story," I broke in, seeing by Mr. Dark's manner that he was likely to speak both ignorantly and impertinently of

my mistress's unlucky friendship for Mr. Meeke. "Go on to the time when I left my master alone in the Red Room, and tell me what he did between midnight and nine the next morning.

"Did?" said Mr. Dark. "Why, he went to bed with the unpleasant conviction on his mind that your mistress had found him out, and with no comfort to speak of, except what he could get out of the brandy bottle. He couldn't sleep; and the more he tossed and tumbled, the more certain he felt that his wife intended to have him tried for bigamy. At last, towards the gray of the morning, he could stand it no longer, and he made up his mind to give the law the slip while he had the chance. As soon as he was dressed, it struck him that there might be a reward offered for catching him, and he determined to make that slight change in his personal appearance which puzzled the witnesses so much before the magistrate to-day. So he opens his dressing-case and crops his hair in no time, and takes off his whiskers next. The fire was out, and he had to shave in cold water. What with that, and what with the flurry of his mind, naturally enough he cut himself —"

"And dried the blood with his night-gown!" says I.

"With his night-gown," repeated Mr. Dark. "It was the first thing that lay handy, and he snatched it up. Wait a bit, though, the cream of the thing is to come. When he had done being his own barber, he

couldn't for the life of him hit on a way of getting rid of the loose hair. The fire was out, and he had no matches, so he couldn't burn it. As for throwing it away, he didn't dare do that in the house, or about the house, for fear of its being found, and betraying what he had done. So he wraps it all up in paper, crams it into his pocket, to be disposed of when he is at a safe distance from the Hall, takes his bag, gets out at the window, shuts it softly after him, and makes for the road as fast as his long legs will carry him. There he walks on till a coach overtakes him, and so travels back to London, to find himself in a fresh scrape as soon as he gets there. An interesting situation, William, and hard travelling from one end of France to the other, had not agreed together in the case of Number Two. Mr. James Smith found her in bed, with doctor's orders that she was not to be moved. There was nothing for it, after that, but to lie by in London till the lady got better. Luckily for us, she didn't hurry herself; so that, after all, your mistress has to thank the very woman who supplanted her, for clearing her character by helping us to find Mr. James Smith!"

"And pray how did you come by that loose hair of his which you showed before the Justice to-day?" I asked.

"Thank Number Two again," says Mr. Dark. "I was put up to asking after it by what she told me. While we were talking about the advertisement, I

made so bold as to inquire what first set her thinking that her husband and the Mr. James Smith whom we wanted might be one and the same man. 'Nothing' says she, 'but seeing him come home with his hair cut short and his whiskers shaved off, and finding that he could not give me any good reason for disfiguring himself in that way, I had my suspicions that something was wrong, and the sight of your advertisement strengthened them directly.' The hearing her say that, suggested to my mind that there might be a difficulty in identifying him after the change in his looks; and I asked him what he had done with the loose hair, before we left London. It was found in the pocket of his travelling coat, just as he had huddled it up there on leaving the Hall, worry and fright and vexation having caused him to forget all about it. Of course I took charge of the parcel; and you know what good it did as well as I do. So to speak, William, it just completed this beautifully neat case. Looking at the matter in a professional point of view, I don't hesitate to say that we have managed our business with Mr. James Smith to perfection. We have produced him at the right time, and we are going to get rid of him at the right time. By to-night he will be on his way to foreign parts with Number Two, and he won't show his nose in England again if he lives to the age of Methuselah."

It was a relief to hear that; and it was almost as great a comfort to find, from what Mr. Dark said next,

that my mistress need fear nothing that Josephine could do for the future.

The charge of theft, on which she was about to be tried, did not afford the shadow of an excuse in law, any more than in logic, for alluding to the crime which her master had committed. If she meant to talk about it, she might do so in her place of transportation, but she would not have the slightest chance of being listened to previously in a court of law.

"In short," said Mr. Dark, rising to take his leave, "as I have told you already, William, it's check-mate for Marmzelle. She didn't manage the business of the robbery half as sharply as I should have expected. She certainly began well enough, by staying modestly at a lodging in the village, to give her attendance at the examinations as it might be required. Nothing could look more innocent and respectable so far. But her hiding the property between the mattresses of her bed — the very first place that any experienced man would think of looking in — was such an amazingly stupid thing to do, that I really can't account for it, unless her mind had more weighing on it than it was able to bear, which, considering the heavy stakes she played for, is likely enough. Anyhow, her hands are tied now, and her tongue too, for the matter of that. Give my respects to your mistress, and tell her that her runaway husband and her lying maid will never either of them harm her again as long as they live. She has nothing to do now but to pluck up her spirits

and live happy. Here's long life to her and to you, William, in the last glass of ale; and here's the same toast to myself in the bottom of the jug."

With those words, Mr. Dark pocketed his large snuff-box, gave a last wink with his bright eye, and walked away, whistling, to catch the London coach. From that time to this, he and I have never met again.

A few last words relating to my mistress, and to the other persons chiefly concerned in this narrative, will conclude all that it is now necessary for me to say.

For some months, the relatives and friends, and I myself, felt sad misgivings on my poor mistress's account. We doubted if it was possible, with such a quick sensitive nature as hers, that she could support the shock which had been inflicted on her. But our powers of endurance are, as I have learnt to believe, more often equal to the burdens laid upon us than we are apt to imagine. I have seen many surprising recoveries from illness, after all hope had been lost — and I have lived to see my mistress recover from the grief and terror which we once thought would prove fatal to her. It was long before she began to hold up her head again; but care and kindness, and time and change, wrought their effect on her at last. She is not now, and never will be again, the woman she was once: her manner is altered; and she looks older by many a year than she really is. But her health

causes us no anxiety now; her spirits are calm and equal; and I have good hope that many quiet years of service in her house are left for me still. I myself have married during the long interval of time which I am now passing over in a few words. This change in my life is, perhaps, not worth mentioning — but I am reminded of my two little children, when I speak of my mistress in her present position. I really think they make the great happiness and interest and amusement of her life, and prevent her from feeling lonely and dried up at heart. It is a pleasant reflection to me to remember this; and perhaps it may be the same to you — for which reason only I speak of it.

As for the other persons connected with the troubles at Darrock Hall, I may mention the vile woman Josephine first, so as to have the sooner done with her. Mr. Dark's guess, when he tried to account for her want of cunning in hiding the stolen property, by saying that her mind might have had more weighing on it than she was able to bear, turned out to be nothing less than the plain and awful truth. After she had been found guilty of the robbery, and had been condemned to seven years transportation, a worse sentence fell upon her from a higher tribunal than any in this world. While she was still in the county jail, previous to her removal, her mind gave way; the madness breaking out in an attempt to set fire to the prison. Her case was pronounced to be hopeless from the first. The lawful asylum received her, and

the lawful asylum will keep her to the end of her days.

Mr. James Smith, who, in my humble opinion, deserved hanging by law, or drowning by accident at least, lived quietly abroad with his Scotch wife (or no wife) for two years; and then died in the most quiet and customary manner, in his bed, after a short illness. His end was described to me as a "highly edifying one." But as he was also reported to have sent his forgiveness to his wife — which was as much as to say that *he* was the injured person of the two — I take leave to consider that he was the same impudent vagabond in his last moments that he had been all his life. His Scotch widow has married again, and is now settled in London. I hope her husband is all her own property this time.

Mr. Meeke must not be forgotten, although he has dropped out of the latter part of my story, because he had nothing to do with the serious events which followed Josephine's perjury. In the confusion and wretchedness of that time, he was treated with very little ceremony, and was quite passed over when we left the neighbourhood. After pining and fretting for some time, as we afterwards heard, in his lonely parsonage, he resigned his living at the first chance he got, and took a sort of under-chaplain's place in an English chapel abroad. He writes to my mistress once or twice a year to ask after her health and well-being; and she writes back to him. That is all the communi-

cation they are ever likely to have with each other. The music they once played together will never sound again. Its last notes have long since faded away — and the last words of this story, trembling on the lips of the teller, may now fade with them.

END OF A PLOT IN PRIVATE LIFE.

MAD MONKTON.



MAD MONKTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE Monktons of Wincot Abbey bore a sad character for want of sociability in our county. They never went to other people's houses, and excepting my father, and a lady and her daughter living near them, never received anybody under their own roof.

Proud as they all certainly were, it was not pride but dread which kept them thus apart from their neighbours. The family had suffered for generations past from the horrible affliction of hereditary insanity, and the members of it shrank from exposing their calamity to others, as they must have exposed it if they had mingled with the busy little world around them. There is a frightful story of a crime committed in past times by two of the Monktons, near relatives, from which the first appearance of the insanity was always supposed to date, but it is needless for me to shock anyone by repeating it. It is enough to say that at intervals almost every form of madness appeared in the family; monomania being the most frequent manifestation of the affliction among them. I have these particulars, and one or two yet to be related, from my father.

At the period of my youth but three of the Monktons were left at the Abbey: Mr. and Mrs. Monkton, and their only child, Alfred, heir to the property. The one other member of this, the elder, branch of the family who was then alive, was Mr. Monkton's younger brother, Stephen. He was an unmarried man, possessing a fine estate in Scotland; but he lived almost entirely on the Continent, and bore the reputation of being a shameless profligate. The family at Wincot held almost as little communication with him as with their neighbours.

I have already mentioned my father, and a lady and her daughter, as the only privileged people who were admitted into Wincot Abbey.

My father had been an old school and college friend of Mr. Monkton, and accident had brought them so much together in later life, that their continued intimacy at Wincot was quite intelligible. I am not so well able to account for the friendly terms on which Mrs. Elmslie (the lady to whom I have alluded) lived with the Monktons. Her late husband had been distantly related to Mrs. Monkton, and my father was her daughter's guardian. But even these claims to friendship and regard never seemed to me strong enough to explain the intimacy between Mrs. Elmslie and the inhabitants of the Abbey. Intimate however they certainly were, and one result of the constant interchange of visits between the two families in due time declared itself: Mr. Monkton's son and Mrs. Elmslie's daughter became attached to each other.

I had no opportunities of seeing much of the young lady; I only remember her at that time as a delicate, gentle, lovable girl, the very opposite in appearance, and apparently in character also, to Alfred Monkton. But perhaps that was one reason why they fell in love with each other. The attachment was soon discovered, and was far from being disapproved by the parents on either side. In all essential points, except that of wealth, the Elmslies were nearly the equals of the Monktons, and want of money in a bride was of no consequence to the heir of Wincot. Alfred, it was well known, would succeed to thirty thousand a year on his father's death.

Thus, though the parents on both sides thought the young people not old enough to be married at once, they saw no reason why Ada and Alfred should not be engaged to each other, with the understanding that they should be united when young Monkton came of age, in two years' time. The person to be consulted in the matter, after the parents, was my father in his capacity of Ada's guardian. He knew that the family misery had shown itself many years ago in Mrs. Monkton, who was her husband's cousin. The *illness*, as it was significantly called, had been palliated by careful treatment, and was reported to have passed away. But my father was not to be deceived. He knew where the hereditary taint still lurked; he viewed with horror the bare possibility of its reappearing one day in the children of his friend's only daughter; and he positively refused his consent to the marriage engagement.

The result was that the doors of the Abbey and the doors of Mrs. Elmslie's house were closed to him. This suspension of friendly intercourse had lasted but a very short time, when Mrs. Monkton died. Her husband, who was fondly attached to her, caught a violent cold while attending her funeral. The cold was neglected, and settled on his lungs. In a few months' time, he followed his wife to the grave, and Alfred was left master of the grand old Abbey, and the fair lands that spread all around it.

At this period Mrs. Elmslie had the indelicacy to endeavour a second time to procure my father's consent to the marriage engagement. He refused it again more positively than before. More than a year passed away. The time was approaching fast when Alfred would be of age. I returned from college to spend the long vacation at home, and made some advances towards bettering my acquaintance with young Monkton. They were evaded — certainly with perfect politeness, but still in such a way as to prevent me from offering my friendship to him again. Any mortification I might have felt at this petty repulse, under ordinary circumstances, was dismissed from my mind by the occurrence of a real misfortune in our household. For some months past my father's health had been failing, and, just at the time of which I am now writing, his sons had to mourn the irreparable calamity of his death.

This event, through some informality or error in the late Mr. Elmslie's will, left the future of Ada's life entirely at her mother's disposal. The consequence was

the immediate ratification of the marriage engagement to which my father had so steadily refused his consent. As soon as the fact was publicly announced, some of Mrs. Elmslie's more intimate friends, who were acquainted with the reports affecting the Monkton family, ventured to mingle with their formal congratulations one or two significant references to the late Mrs. Monkton, and some searching inquiries as to the disposition of her son.

Mrs. Elmslie always met these polite hints with one bold form of answer. She first admitted the existence of those reports about the Monktons which her friends were unwilling to specify distinctly; and then declared that they were infamous calumnies. The hereditary taint had died out of the family generations back. Alfred was the best, the kindest, the sanest of human beings. He loved study and retirement; Ada sympathised with his tastes, and had made her choice unbiassed; if any more hints were dropped about sacrificing her by her marriage, those hints would be viewed as so many insults to her mother, whose affection for her it was monstrous to call in question. This way of talking silenced people, but did not convince them. They began to suspect, what was indeed the actual truth, that Mrs. Elmslie was a selfish, worldly, grasping woman, who wanted to get her daughter well married, and cared nothing for consequences as long as she saw Ada mistress of the greatest establishment in the whole county.

It seemed, however, as if there was some fatality

at work to prevent the attainment of Mrs. Elmslie's great object in life. Hardly was one obstacle to the ill-omened marriage removed by my father's death, before another succeeded it, in the shape of anxieties and difficulties caused by the delicate state of Ada's health. Doctors were consulted in all directions, and the result of their advice was that the marriage must be deferred, and that Miss Elmslie must leave England for a certain time, to reside in a warmer climate; the south of France, if I remember rightly. Thus it happened that just before Alfred came of age, Ada and her mother departed for the Continent, and the union of the two young people was understood to be indefinitely postponed.

Some curiosity was felt in the neighbourhood as to what Alfred Monkton would do under these circumstances. Would he follow his lady-love? Would he go yachting? Would he throw open the doors of the old Abbey at last, and endeavour to forget the absence of Ada and the postponement of his marriage in a round of gaieties? He did none of these things. He simply remained at Wincot, living as suspiciously strange and solitary a life as his father had lived before him. Literally, there was now no companion for him at the Abbey but the old priest — the Monktons, I should have mentioned before, were Roman Catholics — who had held the office of tutor to Alfred from his earliest years. He came of age, and there was not even so much as a private dinner-party at Wincot to celebrate the event. Families in the neighbourhood determined to forget the offence

which his father's reserve had given them, and invited him to their houses. The invitations were politely declined. Civil visitors called resolutely at the Abbey, and were as resolutely bowed away from the doors as soon as they had left their cards. Under this combination of sinister and aggravating circumstances, people in all directions took to shaking their heads mysteriously when the name of Mr. Alfred Monkton was mentioned, hinting at the family calamity, and wondering peevishly or sadly, as their tempers inclined them, what he could possibly do to occupy himself month after month in the lonely old house.

The right answer to this question was not easy to find. It was quite useless, for example, to apply to the priest for it. He was a very quiet, polite old gentleman; his replies were always excessively ready and civil, and appeared at the time to convey an immense quantity of information, but when they came to be reflected on, it was universally observed that nothing tangible could ever be got out of them. The housekeeper, a weird old woman, with a very abrupt and repelling manner, was too fierce and taciturn to be safely approached. The few indoor servants had all been long enough in the family to have learnt to hold their tongues in public as a regular habit. It was only from the farm-servants who supplied the table at the Abbey, that any information could be obtained; and vague enough it was when they came to communicate it.

Some of them had observed the "young master"

walking about the library with heaps of dusty papers in his hands. Others had heard odd noises in the uninhabited parts of the Abbey, had looked up, and had seen him forcing open the old windows, as if to let light and air into rooms supposed to have been shut close for years and years; or had discovered him standing on the perilous summit of one of the crumbling turrets, never ascended before within their memories, and popularly considered to be inhabited by the ghosts of the monks who had once possessed the building. The result of these observations and discoveries, when they were communicated to others, was of course to impress every one with a firm belief that "poor young Monkton was going the way that the rest of the family had gone before him:" which opinion always appeared to be immensely strengthened in the popular mind by a conviction — founded on no particle of evidence — that the priest was at the bottom of all the mischief.

Thus far I have spoken from hearsay evidence mostly. What I have next to tell will be the result of my own personal experience.

CHAPTER II.

ABOUT five months after Alfred Monkton came of age I left college, and resolved to amuse and instruct myself a little by travelling abroad.

At the time when I quitted England, young Monkton was still leading his secluded life at the Abbey, and was, in the opinion of everybody, sinking rapidly, if he had not already succumbed, under the hereditary curse of his family. As to the Elmslies, report said that Ada had benefited by her sojourn abroad, and that mother and daughter were on their way back to England to resume their old relations with the heir of Wincot. Before they returned, I was away on my travels, and wandered half over Europe, hardly ever planning whither I should shape my course beforehand. Chance, which thus led me everywhere, led me at last to Naples. There I met with an old school-friend, who was one of the *attachés* at the English embassy; and there began the extraordinary events in connexion with Alfred Monkton which form the main interest of the story I am now relating.

I was idling away the time one morning with my friend the *attaché*, in the garden of the Villa Reale, when we were passed by a young man, walking alone, who exchanged bows with my friend.

I thought I recognised the dark eager eyes, the colourless cheeks, the strangely-vigilant, anxious

expression which I remembered in past times as characteristic of Alfred Monkton's face, and was about to question my friend on the subject, when he gave me unasked the information of which I was in search.

"That is Alfred Monkton," said he; "he comes from your part of England. You ought to know him."

"I do know a little of him," I answered; "he was engaged to Miss Elmslie when I was last in the neighbourhood of Wincot. Is he married to her yet?"

"No; and he never ought to be. He has gone the way of the rest of the family; or, in plainer words, he has gone mad."

"Mad! But I ought not to be surprised at hearing that, after the reports about him in England."

"I speak from no reports; I speak from what he has said and done here before me, and before hundreds of other people. Surely you must have heard of it?"

"Never. I have been out of the way of news from Naples or England for months past."

"Then I have a very extraordinary story to tell you. You know, of course, that Alfred had an uncle, Stephen Monkton. Well, some time ago, this uncle fought a duel in the Roman states, with a Frenchman, who shot him dead. The seconds and the Frenchman (who was unhurt) took to flight in different directions, as it is supposed. We heard nothing here of the details of the duel till a month after it happened, when one of the French journals published an account of it, taken from papers left by Monkton's second, who died at Paris of

consumption. These papers stated the manner in which the duel was fought, and how it terminated, but nothing more. The surviving second and the Frenchman have never been traced from that time to this. All that anybody knows, therefore, of the duel is that Stephen Monkton was shot; an event which nobody can regret; for a greater scoundrel never existed. The exact place where he died, and what was done with his body, are still mysteries not to be penetrated."

"But what has all this to do with Alfred?"

"Wait a moment, and you will hear. Soon after the news of his uncle's death reached England, what do you think Alfred did? He actually put off his marriage with Miss Elmslie, which was then about to be celebrated, to come out here in search of the burial-place of his wretched scamp of an uncle. And no power on earth will now induce him to return to England and to Miss Elmslie, until he has found the body, and can take it back with him to be buried with all the other dead Monktons, in the vault under Wincot Abbey Chapel. He has squandered his money, pestered the police, exposed himself to the ridicule of the men and the indignation of the women for the last three months, in trying to achieve his insane purpose, and is now as far from it as ever. He will not assign to anybody the smallest motive for his conduct. You can't laugh him out of it, or reason him out of it. When we met him just now, I happen to know that he was on his way to the office of the police minister, to send out fresh agents to search and inquire through

the Roman states for the place where his uncle was shot. And mind, all this time, he professes to be passionately in love with Miss Elmslie, and to be miserable at his separation from her. Just think of that! And then think of his self-imposed absence from her here, to hunt after the remains of a wretch who was a disgrace to the family, and whom he never saw but once or twice in his life. Of all the 'Mad Monktons,' as they used to call them in England, Alfred is the maddest. He is actually our principal excitement in this dull opera season; though, for my own part, when I think of the poor girl in England, I am a great deal more ready to despise him than to laugh at him."

"You know the Elmslies, then?"

"Intimately. The other day my mother wrote to me from England, after having seen Ada. This escapade of Monkton's has outraged all her friends. They have been entreating her to break off the match, which it seems she could do if she liked. Even her mother, sordid and selfish as she is, has been obliged at last, in common decency, to side with the rest of the family; but the good faithful girl won't give Monkton up. She humours his insanity, declares he gave her a good reason, in secret, for going away; says she could always make him happy when they were together in the old Abbey, and can make him still happier when they are married; in short, she loves him dearly, and will therefore believe in him to the last.

Nothing shakes her; she has made up her mind to throw away her life on him, and she will do it."

"I hope not. Mad as his conduct looks to us, he may have some sensible reason for it that we cannot imagine. Does his mind seem at all disordered when he talks on ordinary topics?"

"Not in the least. When you can get him to say anything, which is not often, he talks like a sensible, well-educated man. Keep silence about his precious errand here, and you would fancy him the gentlest and most temperate of human beings. But touch the subject of his vagabond of an uncle, and the Monkton madness comes out directly. The other night a lady asked him, jestingly of course, whether he had ever seen his uncle's ghost. He scowled at her like a perfect fiend, and said that he and his uncle would answer her question together some day, if they came from hell to do it. We laughed at his words, but the lady fainted at his looks, and we had a scene of hysterics and hartshorn in consequence. Any other man would have been kicked out of the room for nearly frightening a pretty woman to death in that way; but 'Mad Monkton,' as we have christened him, is a privileged lunatic in Neapolitan society, because he is English, good-looking, and worth thirty thousand a year. He goes out everywhere, under the impression that he may meet with somebody who has been let into the secret of the place where the mysterious duel was fought. If you are introduced to him, he is sure to ask you whether you know anything about it; but be-

ware of following up the subject after you have answered him, unless you want to make sure that he is out of his senses. In that case, only talk of his uncle, and the result will rather more than satisfy you."

A day or two after this conversation with my friend the *attaché*, I met Monkton at an evening party.

The moment he heard my name mentioned, his face flushed up; he drew me away into a corner, and referring to his cool reception of my advance, years ago, towards making his acquaintance, asked my pardon for what he termed his inexcusable ingratitude with an earnestness and an agitation which utterly astonished me. His next proceeding was to question me, as my friend had said he would, about the place of the mysterious duel.

An extraordinary change came over him while he interrogated me on this point. Instead of looking into my face as they had looked hitherto, his eyes wandered away, and fixed themselves intensely, almost fiercely, either on the perfectly empty wall at our side, or on the vacant space between the wall and ourselves — it was impossible to say which. I had come to Naples from Spain by sea, and briefly told him so, as the best way of satisfying him that I could not assist his inquiries. He pursued them no further; and mindful of my friend's warning, I took care to lead the conversation to general topics. He looked back at me directly, and as long as we stood in our corner, his

eyes never wandered away again to the empty wall or the vacant space at our side.

Though more ready to listen than to speak, his conversation, when he did talk, had no trace of anything the least like insanity about it. He had evidently read, not generally only, but deeply as well, and could apply his reading with singular felicity to the illustration of almost any subject under discussion, neither obtruding his knowledge absurdly, nor concealing it affectedly. His manner was in itself a standing protest against such a nickname as "Mad Monkton." He was so shy, so quiet, so composed and gentle in all his actions, that at times I should have been almost inclined to call him effeminate. We had a long talk together on the first evening of our meeting; we often saw each other afterwards, and never lost a single opportunity of bettering our acquaintance. I felt that he had taken a liking to me, and in spite of what I had heard about his behaviour to Miss Elmslie, in spite of the suspicions which the history of his family and his own conduct had arrayed against him, I began to like "Mad Monkton" as much as he liked me. We took many a quiet ride together in the country, and sailed often along the shores of the Bay on either side. But for two eccentricities in his conduct which I could not at all understand, I should soon have felt as much at my ease in his society as if he had been my own brother.

The first of these eccentricities consisted in the re-appearance on several occasions of the odd expression

in his eyes, which I had first seen when he asked me whether I knew anything about the duel. No matter what we were talking about, or where we happened to be, there were times when he would suddenly look away from my face, now on one side of me, now on the other, but always where there was nothing to see, and always with the same intensity and fierceness in his eyes. This looked so like madness — or hypochondria, at the least — that I felt afraid to ask him about it, and always pretended not to observe him.

The second peculiarity in his conduct was that he never referred, while in my company, to the reports about his errand at Naples, and never once spoke of Miss Elmslie, or of his life at Wincot Abbey. This not only astonished me, but amazed those who had noticed our intimacy, and who had made sure that I must be the depositary of all his secrets. But the time was near at hand when this mystery, and some other mysteries of which I had no suspicion at that period, were all to be revealed.

I met him one night at a large ball, given by a Russian nobleman, whose name I could not pronounce then, and cannot remember now. I had wandered away from reception-room, ball-room, and card-room, to a small apartment at one extremity of the palace, which was half conservatory, half boudoir, and which had been prettily illuminated for the occasion, with Chinese lanthorns. Nobody was in the room when I got there. The view over the Mediterranean, bathed in the bright softness of Italian moon-light, was so

lovely, that I remained for a long time at the window, looking out, and listening to the dance music which faintly reached me from the ball-room. My thoughts were far away with the relations I had left in England, when I was startled out of them by hearing my name softly pronounced.

I looked round directly, and saw Monkton standing in the room. A livid paleness overspread his face, and his eyes were turned away from me with the same extraordinary expression in them to which I have already alluded.

"Do you mind leaving the ball early to-night?" he asked, still not looking at me.

"Not at all," said I. "Can I do anything for you? Are you ill?"

"No, at least nothing to speak of. Will you come to my rooms?"

"At once, if you like."

"No, not at once. I must go home directly; but don't you come to me for half an hour yet. You have not been at my rooms before, I know; but you will easily find them out, they are close by. There is a card with my address. I *must* speak to you to-night; my life depends on it. Pray come! for God's sake come when the half hour is up!"

I promised to be punctual, and he left me directly.

Most people will be easily able to imagine the state of nervous impatience and vague expectation in which I passed the allotted period of delay, after hearing such words as those Monkton had spoken to me. Be-

fore the half hour had quite expired, I began to make my way out through the ball-room.

At the head of the staircase, my friend the *attaché* met me.

"What! going away already?" said he.

"Yes; and on a very curious expedition. I am going to Monkton's rooms, by his own invitation."

"You don't mean it! Upon my honour, you're a bold fellow to trust yourself alone with 'Mad Monkton' when the moon is at the full."

"He is ill, poor fellow. Besides, I don't think him half as mad as you do."

"We won't dispute about that; but mark my words, he has not asked you to go where no visitor has ever been admitted before, without a special purpose. I predict that you will see or hear something to-night which you will remember for the rest of your life."

We parted. When I knocked at the courtyard gate of the house where Monkton lived, my friend's last words on the palace staircase recurred to me; and though I had laughed at him when he spoke them, I began to suspect even then that his prediction would be fulfilled.

CHAPTER III

THE porter who let me into the house where Monkton lived, directed me to the floor on which his rooms were situated. On getting up stairs, I found his door on the landing ajar. He heard my footsteps, I suppose, for he called to me to come in before I could knock.

I entered, and found him sitting by the table, with some loose letters in his hand, which he was just tying together into a packet. I noticed, as he asked me to sit down, that his expression looked more composed, though the paleness had not yet left his face. He thanked me for coming; repeated that he had something very important to say to me; and then stopped short, apparently too much embarrassed to proceed. I tried to set him at his ease by assuring him that if my assistance or advice could be of any use, I was ready to place myself and my time heartily and unreservedly at his service.

As I said this, I saw his eyes beginning to wander away from my face — to wander slowly, inch by inch as it were, until they stopped at a certain point, with the same fixed stare into vacancy which had so often startled me on former occasions. The whole expression of his face altered as I had never yet seen it alter; he sat before me, looking like a man in a death-trance.

"You are very kind," he said, slowly and faintly, speaking, not to me, but in the direction in which his eyes were still fixed. "I know you can help me; but —"

He stopped; his face whitened horribly, and the perspiration broke out all over it. He tried to continue; said a word or two; then stopped again. Seriously alarmed about him, I rose from my chair, with the intention of getting him some water from a jug which I saw standing on a side table.

He sprang up at the same moment. All the suspicions I had ever heard whispered against his sanity flashed over my mind in an instant; and I involuntarily stepped back a pace or two.

"Stop," he said, seating himself again; "don't mind me; and don't leave your chair. I want — I wish, if you please, to make a little alteration, before we say anything more. Do you mind sitting in a strong light?"

"Not in the least."

I had hitherto been seated in the shade of his reading-lamp, the only light in the room.

As I answered him, he rose again; and going into another apartment, returned with a large lamp in his hand; then took two candles from the side table, and two others from the chimney-piece; placed them all, to my amazement, together, so as to stand exactly between us; and then tried to light them. His hand trembled so, that he was obliged to give up the attempt, and allow me to come to his assistance. By his

direction I took the shade off the reading-lamp, after I had lit the other lamp and the four candles. When we sat down again, with this concentration of light between us, his better and gentler manner began to return; and while he now addressed me, he spoke without the slightest hesitation.

"It is useless to ask whether you have heard the reports about me," he said; "I know that you have. My purpose to-night is to give you some reasonable explanation of the conduct which has produced those reports. My secret has been hitherto confided to one person only; I am now about to trust it to your keeping, with a special object which will appear as I go on. First, however, I must begin by telling you exactly what the great difficulty is which obliges me to be still absent from England. I want your advice and your help; and, to conceal nothing from you, I want also to test your forbearance and your friendly sympathy, before I can venture on thrusting my miserable secret into your keeping. Will you pardon this apparent distrust of your frank and open character — this apparent ingratitude for your kindness towards me ever since we first met?"

I begged him not to speak of these things, but to go on.

"You know," he proceeded, "that I am here to recover the body of my Uncle Stephen, and to carry it back with me to our family-burial place in England; and you must also be aware that I have not yet succeeded in discovering his remains. Try to pass over

for the present whatever may seem extraordinary and incomprehensible in such a purpose as mine is; and read this newspaper article, where the ink-line is traced: It is the only evidence hitherto obtained on the subject of the fatal duel in which my uncle fell; and I want to hear what course of proceeding the perusal of it may suggest to you as likely to be best on my part."

He handed me an old French newspaper. The substance of what I read there is still so firmly impressed on my memory, that I am certain of being able to repeat correctly, at this distance of time, all the facts which it is necessary for me to communicate to the reader.

The article began, I remember, with editorial remarks on the great curiosity then felt in regard to the fatal duel between the Count St. Lo and Mr. Stephen Monkton, an English gentleman. The writer proceeded to dwell at great length on the extraordinary secrecy in which the whole affair had been involved from first to last; and to express a hope that the publication of a certain manuscript, to which his introductory observations referred, might lead to the production of fresh evidence from other and better informed quarters. The manuscript had been found among the papers of Monsieur Foulon, Mr. Monkton's second, who had died at Paris of a rapid decline, shortly after returning to his home in that city from the scene of the duel. The document was unfinished, having been left incomplete at the very place where the reader would

most wish to find it continued. No reason could be discovered for this, and no second manuscript bearing on the all-important subject had been found, after the strictest search among the papers left by the deceased.

The document itself then followed.

It purported to be an agreement privately drawn up between Mr. Monkton's second, Monsieur Foulon, and the Count St. Lo's second, Monsieur Dalville; and contained a statement of all the arrangements for conducting the duel. The paper was dated "Naples, February 22nd;" and was divided into some seven or eight clauses.

The first clause described the origin and nature of the quarrel — a very disgraceful affair on both sides, worth neither remembering nor repeating. The second clause stated that the challenged man having chosen the pistol as his weapon, and the challenger (an excellent swordsman) having, on his side, thereupon insisted that the duel should be fought in such a manner as to make the first fire decisive in its results, the seconds, seeing that fatal consequences must inevitably follow the hostile meeting, determined, first of all, that the duel should be kept a profound secret from everybody, and that the place where it was to be fought should not be made known beforehand, even to the principals themselves. It was added that this excess of precaution had been rendered absolutely necessary, in consequence of a recent address from the Pope to the ruling powers in Italy, commenting on the scandalous fre-

quency of the practice of duelling, and urgently desiring that the laws against duellists should be enforced for the future with the utmost rigour.

The third clause detailed the manner in which it had been arranged that the duel should be fought.

The pistols having been loaded by the seconds on the ground, the combatants were to be placed thirty paces apart, and were to toss up for the first fire. The man who won was to advance ten paces — marked out for him beforehand — and was then to discharge his pistol. If he missed, or failed to disable his opponent, the latter was free to advance, if he chose, the whole remaining twenty paces before he fired in his turn. This arrangement ensured the decisive termination of the duel at the first discharge of the pistols, and both principals and seconds pledged themselves on either side to abide by it.

The fourth clause stated that the seconds had agreed that the duel should be fought out of the Neapolitan states, but left themselves to be guided by circumstances as to the exact locality in which it should take place. The remaining clauses, so far as I remember them, were devoted to detailing the different precautions to be adopted for avoiding discovery. The duellists and their seconds were to leave Naples in separate parties; were to change carriages several times; were to meet at a certain town, or, failing that, at a certain post-house on the high road from Naples to Rome; were to carry drawing-books, colour-boxes, and camp-stools, as if they had been artists out on a sketching

tour; and were to proceed to the place of the duel on foot, employing no guides, for fear of treachery. Such general arrangements as these, and others for facilitating the flight of the survivors after the affair was over, formed the conclusion of this extraordinary document, which was signed, in initials only, by both the seconds.

Just below the initials, appeared the beginning of a narrative, dated "Paris," and evidently intended to describe the duel itself with extreme minuteness. The hand-writing was that of the deceased second.

Monsieur Foulon, the gentleman in question, stated his belief that circumstances might transpire which would render an account by an eye-witness of the hostile meeting between St. Lo and Mr. Monkton an important document. He proposed, therefore, as one of the seconds, to testify that the duel had been fought in exact accordance with the terms of the agreement, both the principals conducting themselves like men of gallantry and honour (!). And he further announced that, in order not to compromise any one, he should place the paper containing his testimony in safe hands, with strict directions that it was on no account to be opened, except in a case of the last emergency.

After this preamble, Monsieur Foulon related that the duel had been fought two days after the drawing up of the agreement, in a locality to which accident had conducted the duelling party. (The name of the place was not mentioned, nor even the neighbourhood in which it was situated.) The men having been placed

according to previous arrangement, the Count St. Lo had won the toss for the first fire, had advanced his ten paces, and had shot his opponent in the body. Mr. Monkton did not immediately fall, but staggered forward some six or seven paces, discharged his pistol ineffectually at the count, and dropped to the ground a dead man. Monsieur Foulon then stated that he tore a leaf from his pocket-book, wrote on it a brief description of the manner in which Mr. Monkton had died, and pinned the paper to his clothes; this proceeding having been rendered necessary by the peculiar nature of the plan organized on the spot for safely disposing of the dead body. What this plan was, or what was done with the corpse, did not appear, for at this important point the narrative abruptly broke off.

A foot-note in the newspaper merely stated the manner in which the document had been obtained for publication, and repeated the announcement contained in the editor's introductory remarks, that no continuation had been found by the persons entrusted with the care of Monsieur Foulon's papers. I have now given the whole substance of what I read, and have mentioned all that was then known of Mr. Stephen Monkton's death.

When I gave the newspaper back to Alfred, he was too much agitated to speak; but he reminded me by a sign that he was anxiously waiting to hear what I had to say. My position was a very trying and a very painful one. I could hardly tell what consequences might not follow any want of caution on my part,

and could think at first of no safer plan than questioning him carefully before I committed myself either one way or the other.

"Will you excuse me if I ask you a question or two before I give you my advice?" said I.

He nodded impatiently.

"Yes, yes; any questions you like."

"Were you at any time in the habit of seeing your uncle frequently?"

"I never saw him more than twice in my life: on each occasion, when I was a mere child."

"Then you could have had no very strong personal regard for him?"

"Regard for him! I should have been ashamed to feel any regard for him. He disgraced us wherever he went."

"May I ask if any family motive is involved in your anxiety to recover his remains?"

"Family motives may enter into it among others — but why do you ask?"

"Because, having heard that you employ the police to assist your search, I was anxious to know whether you had stimulated their superiors to make them do their best in your service, by giving some strong personal reasons at head-quarters for the very unusual project which has brought you here."

"I give no reasons. I pay for the work I want done, and in return for my liberality I am treated with the most infamous indifference on all sides. A stranger in the country, and badly acquainted with the language,

I can do nothing to help myself. The authorities, both at Rome and in this place, pretend to assist me, pretend to search and inquire as I would have them search and inquire and do nothing more. I am insulted, laughed at, almost to my face."

"Do you not think it possible — mind, I have no wish to excuse the misconduct of the authorities, and do not share in any such opinion myself — but, do you not think it likely that the police may doubt whether you are in earnest?"

"Not in earnest!" he cried, starting up and confronting me fiercely, with wild eyes and quickened breath. "Not in earnest! *You* think I'm not in earnest, too. I know you think it, though you tell me you don't. Stop! before we say another word, your own eyes shall convince you. Come here — only for a minute — only for one minute!"

I followed him into his bed-room, which opened out of the sitting-room. At one side of his bed stood a large packing-case of plain wood, upwards of seven feet in length."

"Open the lid, and look in," he said, "while I hold the candle so that you can see."

I obeyed his directions, and discovered, to my astonishment, that the packing-case contained a leaden coffin, magnificently emblazoned with the arms of the Monkton family, and inscribed in old-fashioned letters with the name of "Stephen Monkton," his age and the manner of his death being added underneath.

"I keep his coffin ready for him," whispered Alfred, close at my ear. "Does that look like earnest?"

It looked more like insanity — so like that I shrank from answering him.

"Yes! yes! I see you are convinced," he continued, quickly; "we may go back into the next room, and may talk without restraint on either side now."

On returning to our places, I mechanically moved my chair away from the table. My mind was by this time in such a state of confusion and uncertainty about what it would be best for me to say or do next, that I forgot for the moment the position he had assigned to me when we lit the candles. He reminded me of this directly.

"Don't move away," he said, very earnestly; "keep on sitting in the light; pray do! I'll soon tell you why I am so particular about that. But first give me your advice; help me in my great distress and suspense. Remember, you promised me you would."

I made an effort to collect my thoughts, and succeeded. It was useless to treat the affair otherwise than seriously in his presence; it would have been cruel not to have advised him as I best could.

"You know," I said, "that two days after the drawing up of the agreement at Naples, the duel was fought out of the Neapolitan states. This fact has of course led you to the conclusion that all inquiries about localities had better be confined to the Roman territory?"

"Certainly: the search, such as it is, has been made there, and there only. If I can believe the police, they and their agents have inquired for the place where the

duel was fought (offering a large reward in my name to the person who can discover it), all along the high-road from Naples to Rome. They have also circulated — at least, so they tell me — descriptions of the duellists and their seconds; have left an agent to superintend investigations at the post-house, and another at the town mentioned as meeting-points in the agreement; and have endeavoured by correspondence with foreign authorities to trace the Count St. Lo and Monsieur Dalville to their place or places of refuge. All these efforts, supposing them to have been really made, have hitherto proved utterly fruitless."

"My impression is," said I, after a moment's consideration, "that all inquiries made along the high-road, or anywhere near Rome, are likely to be made in vain. As to the discovery of your uncle's remains, that is, I think, identical with the discovery of the place where he was shot; for those engaged in the duel would certainly not risk detection by carrying a corpse any distance with them in their flight. The place, then, is all that we want to find out. Now, let us consider for a moment. The duelling-party changed carriages; travelled separately, two and two; doubtless took roundabout roads; stopped at the post-house and the town as a blind; walked, perhaps, a considerable distance unguided. Depend upon it, such precautions as these (which we know they must have employed) left them very little time out of the two days — though they might start at sunrise, and not stop at nightfall — for straightforward travelling. My belief therefore is,

that the duel was fought somewhere near the Neapolitan frontier; and if I had been the police agent who conducted the search, I should only have pursued it parallel with the frontier, starting from west to east till I got up among the lonely places in the mountains. That is my idea: do you think it worth anything?"

His face flushed all over in an instant. "I think it an inspiration!" he cried. "Not a day is to be lost in carrying out our plan. The police are not to be trusted with it. I must start myself, to-morrow morning; and you —"

He stopped; his face grew suddenly pale; he sighed heavily; his eyes wandered once more into the fixed look at vacancy; and the rigid, deathly expression fastened again upon all his features.

"I must tell you my secret before I talk of to-morrow," he proceeded, faintly. "If I hesitated any longer at confessing everything, I should be unworthy of your past kindness, unworthy of the help which it is my last hope that you will gladly give me when you have heard all."

I begged him to wait until he was more composed, until he was better able to speak; but he did not appear to notice what I said. Slowly, and struggling as it seemed against himself, he turned a little away from me; and, bending his head over the table, supported it on his hand. The packet of letters with which I had seen him occupied when I came in, lay just beneath his eyes. He looked down on it steadfastly when he next spoke to me.

CHAPTER IV.

"You were born, I believe, in our county," he said; "perhaps therefore you may have heard at some time of a curious old prophecy about our family, which is still preserved among the traditions of Wincot Abbey?"

"I have heard of such a prophecy," I answered; "but I never knew in what terms it was expressed. It professed to predict the extinction of your family, or something of that sort, did it not?"

"No inquiries," he went on, "have traced back that prophecy to the time when it was first made; none of our family records tell us anything of its origin. Old servants and old tenants of ours remember to have heard it from their fathers and grandfathers. The monks, whom we succeeded in the Abbey in Henry the Eighth's time, got knowledge of it in some way; for I myself discovered the rhymes in which we know the prophecy to have been preserved from a very remote period, written on a blank leaf of one of the Abbey manuscripts. These are the verses, if verses they deserve to be called: —

When in Wincot vault a place
Waits for one of Monkton's race;
When that one forlorn shall lie
Graveless under open sky,
Beggared of six feet of earth,
Though lord of acres from his birth —
That shall be a certain sign
Of the end of Monkton's line.

Dwindling ever faster, faster,
Dwindling to the last-left master;
From mortal ken, from light of day,
Monkton's race shall pass away."

"The prediction seems almost vague enough to have been uttered by an ancient oracle," said I, observing that he waited, after repeating the verses, as if expecting me to say something.

"Vague or not, it is being accomplished," he returned. "I am now the 'Last-left Master' — the last of that elder line of our family at which the prediction points; and the corpse of Stephen Monkton is not in the vaults of Wincot Abbey. Wait, before you exclaim against me! I have more to say about this. Long before the Abbey was ours, when we lived in the ancient manor-house near it (the very ruins of which have long since disappeared), the family-burying place was in the vault under the Abbey chapel. Whether in those remote times the prediction against us was known and dreaded, or not, this much is certain: everyone of the Monktons (whether living at the Abbey or on the smaller estate in Scotland) was buried in Wincot vault, no matter at what risk or what sacrifice. In the fierce fighting days of the olden time, the bodies of my ancestors who fell in foreign places were recovered and brought back to Wincot, though it often cost, not heavy ransom only, but desperate bloodshed as well, to obtain them. This superstition, if you please to call it so, has never died out of the family from that time to the present day; for centuries the succession of the dead in the vault at the Abbey has been unbroken — absolutely

unbroken — until now. The place mentioned in the prediction as waiting to be filled is Stephen Monkton's place; the voice that cries vainly to the earth for shelter is the spirit-voice of the dead. As surely as if I saw it, I know that they have left him unburied on the ground where he fell!"

He stopped me before I could utter a word in remonstrance, by slowly rising to his feet, and pointing in the same direction towards which his eyes had wandered a short time since.

"I can guess what you want to ask me," he exclaimed, sternly and loudly; "you want to ask me how I can be mad enough to believe in a doggreel prophecy, uttered in an age of superstition to awe the most ignorant hearers. I answer" (at those words his voice sank suddenly to a whisper), "I answer, because *Stephen Monkton himself stands there at this moment, confirming me in my belief.*"

Whether it was the awe and horror that looked out ghastly from his face as he confronted me, whether it was that I had never hitherto fairly believed in the reports about his madness, and that the conviction of their truth now forced itself upon me on a sudden, I know not; but I felt my blood curdling as he spoke, and I knew in my own heart, as I sat there speechless, that I dare not turn round and look where he was still pointing close at my side.

"I see there," he went on in the same whispering voice, "the figure of a dark-complexioned man, standing up with his head uncovered. One of his

hands, still clutching a pistol, has fallen to his side; the other presses a bloody handkerchief over his mouth. The spasm of mortal agony convulses his features; but I know them for the features of a swarthy man, who twice frightened me by taking me up in his arms when I was a child, at Wincot Abbey. I asked the nurses at the time who that man was, and they told me it was my uncle, Stephen Monkton. Plainly, as if he stood there living, I see him now at your side, with the death-glare in his great black eyes; and so have I ever seen him since the moment when he was shot; at home and abroad, waking or sleeping, day and night, we are always together wherever I go!"

His whispering tones sank into almost inaudible murmuring as he pronounced these last words. From the direction and expression of his eyes, I suspected that he was speaking to the apparition. If I had beheld it myself at that moment, it would have been, I think, a less horrible sight to witness than to see him, as I saw him now, muttering inarticulately at vacancy. My own nerves were more shaken than I could have thought possible by what had passed. A vague dread of being near him in his present mood came over me, and I moved back a step or two.

He noticed the action instantly.

"Don't go! — pray, pray don't go! Have I alarmed you? Don't you believe me? Do the lights make your eyes ache? I only asked you to sit in the glare of the candles, because I could not bear to

see the light that always shines from the phantom there at dusk, shining over you as you sat in the shadow. Don't go — don't leave me yet!"

There was an utter forlornness, an unspeakable misery in his face as he spoke these words, which gave me back my self-possession by the simple process of first moving me to pity. I resumed my chair, and said that I would stay with him as long as he wished.

"Thank you a thousand times! You are patience and kindness itself," he said, going back to his former place, and resuming his former gentleness of manner. "Now that I have got over my first confession of the misery that follows me in secret wherever I go, I think I can tell you calmly all that remains to be told. You see, as I said, my uncle Stephen," — he turned away his head quickly, and looked down at the table as the name passed his lips — "my uncle Stephen came twice to Wincot while I was a child, and on both occasions frightened me dreadfully. He only took me up in his arms, and spoke to me — very kindly, as I afterwards heard, for *him* — but he terrified me, nevertheless. Perhaps I was frightened at his great stature, his swarthy complexion, and his thick black hair and moustache, as other children might have been; perhaps the mere sight of him had some strange influence on me which I could not then understand, and cannot now explain. However it was, I used to dream of him long after he had gone away; and to fancy that he was stealing on

me to catch me up in his arms, whenever I was left in the dark. The servants who took care of me found this out, and used to threaten me with my uncle Stephen whenever I was perverse and difficult to manage. As I grew up, I still retained my vague dread and abhorrence of our absent relative. I always listened intently, yet without knowing why, whenever his name was mentioned by my father or my mother — listened with an unaccountable presentiment that something terrible had happened to him, or was about to happen to me. This feeling only changed when I was left alone in the Abbey; and then it seemed to merge into the eager curiosity which had begun to grow on me, rather before that time, about the origin of the ancient prophecy predicting the extinction of our race. Are you following me?"

"I follow every word with the closest attention."

"You must know, then, that I had first found out some fragments of the old rhyme, in which the prophecy occurs, quoted as a curiosity in an antiquarian book in the library. On the page opposite this quotation, had been pasted a rude old woodcut, representing a dark-haired man, whose face was so strangely like what I remembered of my uncle Stephen, that the portrait absolutely startled me. When I asked my father about this — it was then just before his death — he either knew, or pretended to know, nothing of it; and when I afterwards mentioned the prediction he fretfully changed the subject. It was just the same with our chaplain when I spoke to him. He said the

portrait had been done centuries before my uncle was born; and called the prophecy doggerel and nonsense. I used to argue with him on the latter point, asking why we Catholics, who believed that the gift of working miracles had never departed from certain favoured persons, might not just as well believe that the gift of prophecy had never departed either? He would not dispute with me; he would only say that I must not waste time in thinking of such trifles, that I had more imagination than was good for me, and must suppress instead of exciting it. Such advice as this only irritated my curiosity. I determined secretly to search throughout the oldest uninhabited part of the Abbey, and to try if I could not find out from forgotten family records what the portrait was, and when the prophecy had been first written or uttered. Did you ever pass a day alone in the long-deserted chambers of an ancient house?"

"Never; such solitude as that is not at all to my taste."

"Ah! what a life it was when I began my search. I should like to live it over again! Such tempting suspense, such strange discoveries, such wild fancies, such enthralling terrors, all belonged to that life! Only think of breaking open the door of a room which no living soul had entered before you for nearly a hundred years; think of the first step forward into a region of airless, awful stillness, where the light falls faint and sickly through closed windows and rotting curtains; think of the ghostly creaking of the old floor that cries

out on you for treading on it, step as softly as you will; think of arms, helmets, weird tapestries of bygone days, that seem to be moving out on you from the walls as you first walk up to them in the dim light; think of prying into great cabinets and iron-clasped chests, not knowing what horrors may appear when you tear them open; of poring over their contents till twilight stole on you, and darkness grew terrible in the lonely place; of trying to leave it, and not being able to go, as if something held you; of wind wailing at you outside; of shadows darkening round you, and closing you up in obscurity within — only think of these things, and you may imagine the fascination of suspense and terror in such a life as mine was in those past days!”

(I shrunk from imagining that life: it was bad enough to see its results, as I saw them before me now.)

“Well, my search lasted months and months; then it was suspended a little, then resumed. In whatever direction I pursued it, I always found something to lure me on. Terrible confessions of past crimes, shocking proofs of secret wickedness that had been hidden securely from all eyes but mine, came to light. Sometimes these discoveries were associated with particular parts of the Abbey, which have had a horrible interest of their own for me ever since. Sometimes with certain old portraits in the picture gallery, which I actually dreaded to look at, after what I had found out. There were periods when the results of this

search of mine so horrified me, that I determined to give it up entirely; but I never could persevere in my resolution, the temptation to go on seemed at certain intervals to get too strong for me, and then I yielded to it again and again. At last I found the book that had belonged to the monks, with the whole of the prophecy written in the blank leaf. This first success encouraged me to get back further yet in the family records. I had discovered nothing hitherto of the identity of the mysterious portrait, but the same intuitive conviction which had assured me of its extraordinary resemblance to my uncle Stephen, seemed also to assure me that he must be more closely connected with the prophecy, and must know more of it than anyone else. I had no means of holding any communication with him, no means of satisfying myself whether this strange idea of mine were right or wrong, until the day when my doubts were settled for ever by the same terrible proof which is now present to me in this very room."

He paused for a moment, and looked at me intently and suspiciously. Then asked if I believed all he had said to me so far. My instant reply in the affirmative seemed to satisfy his doubts, and he went on.

"On a fine evening in February, I was standing alone in one of the deserted rooms of the western turret at the Abbey, looking at the sunset. Just before the sun went down, I felt a sensation stealing over me which it is impossible to explain. I saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. This utter self-oblivion came

suddenly; it was not fainting, for I did not fall to the ground, did not move an inch from my place. If such a thing could be, I should say it was the temporary separation of soul and body, without death; but all description of my situation at that time is impossible. Call my state what you will, trance or catalepsy, I know that I remained standing by the window utterly unconscious — dead, mind and body — until the sun had set. Then I came to my senses again; and then, when I opened my eyes, there was the apparition of Stephen Monkton standing opposite to me, faintly luminous, just as it stands opposite me at this very moment by your side."

"Was this before the news of the duel reached England?" I asked.

"*Two weeks before* the news of it reached us at Wincot. And even when we heard of the duel, we did not hear of the day on which it was fought. I only found that out when the document which you have read was published in the French newspaper. The date of that document, you will remember, is February 22nd, and it is stated that the duel was fought two days afterwards. I wrote down in my pocket-book, on the evening when I saw the phantom, the day of the month on which it first appeared to me. That day was the 24th of February."

He paused again as if expecting me to say something. After the words he had just spoken, what could I say? what could I think?

"Even in the first horror of first seeing the appa-

rition," he went on, "the prophecy against our house came to my mind, and with it the conviction that I beheld before me, in that spectral presence, the warning of my own doom. As soon as I recovered a little, I determined, nevertheless, to test the reality of what I saw; to find out whether I was the dupe of my own diseased fancy or not. I left the turret; the phantom left it with me. I made an excuse to have the drawing-room at the Abbey brilliantly lighted up; the figure was still opposite me. I walked out into the park; it was there in the clear starlight. I went away from home, and travelled many miles to the seaside; still the tall dark man in his death-agony was with me. After this, I strove against the fatality no more. I returned to the Abbey, and tried to resign myself to my misery. But this was not to be. I had a hope that was dearer to me than my own life; I had one treasure belonging to me that I shuddered at the prospect of losing; and when the phantom presence stood a warning obstacle between me and this one treasure, this dearest hope, then my misery grew heavier than I could bear. You must know what I am alluding to; you must have heard often that I was engaged to be married?"

"Yes, often. I have some acquaintance myself with Miss Elmslie."

"You never can know all that she has sacrificed for me — never can imagine what I have felt for years and years past" — his voice trembled, and the tears came into his eyes — "but I dare not trust myself to speak of that; the thought of the old happy days in the Ab-

bey almost breaks my heart now. Let me get back to the other subject. I must tell you that I kept the frightful vision which pursued me, at all times and in all places, a secret from everybody, knowing the vile reports about my having inherited madness from my family, and fearing that an unfair advantage would be taken of any confession that I might make. Though the phantom always stood opposite to me, and therefore always appeared either before or by the side of any person to whom I spoke, I soon schooled myself to hide from others that I was looking at it, except on rare occasions — when I have perhaps betrayed myself to you. But my self-possession availed me nothing with Ada. The day of our marriage was approaching."

He stopped and shuddered. I waited in silence till he had controlled himself.

"Think," he went on, "think of what I must have suffered at looking always on that hideous vision, whenever I looked on my betrothed wife! Think of my taking her hand, and seeming to take it through the figure of the apparition! Think of the calm angel-face and the tortured spectre-face being always together, whenever my eyes met hers! Think of this, and you will not wonder that I betrayed my secret to her. She eagerly entreated to know the worst — nay more, she insisted on knowing it. At her bidding I told all; and then left her free to break our engagement. The thought of death was in my heart as I spoke the parting words — death by my own act, if life still held out after our separation. She suspected that thought;

she knew it, and never left me till her good influence had destroyed it for ever. But for her, I should not have been alive now — but for her, I should never have attempted the project which has brought me here.”

“Do you mean that it was at Miss Elmslie’s suggestion that you came to Naples?” I asked in amazement.

“I mean that what she said, suggested the design which has brought me to Naples,” he answered. “While I believed that the phantom had appeared to me as the fatal messenger of death, there was no comfort, there was misery rather in hearing her say that no power on earth should make her desert me, and that she would live for me, and for me only, through every trial. But it was far different when we afterwards reasoned together about the purpose which the apparition had come to fulfil — far different when she showed me that its mission might be for good, instead of for evil; and that the warning it was sent to give, might be to my profit instead of to my loss. At those words, the new idea which gave the new hope of life came to me in an instant. I believed then, what I believe now, that I have a supernatural warrant for my errand here. In that faith I live; without it I should die. *She* never ridiculed it, never scorned it as insanity. Mark what I say! ‘The spirit that appeared to me in the Abbey, that has never left me since, that stands there now by your side, warns me to escape from the fatality which hangs over our race, and commands me, if I would avoid it, to bury the unburied dead. Mortal loves and mortal interests must bow to that awful bidding. The

spectre-presence will never leave me till I have sheltered the corpse that cries to the earth to cover it! I dare not return — I dare not marry till I have filled the place that is empty in Wincot vault.”

His eyes flashed and dilated; his voice deepened; a fanatic ecstasy shone in his expression as he uttered these words. Shocked and grieved as I was, I made no attempt to remonstrate or to reason with him. It would have been useless to have referred to any of the usual common-places about optical delusions, or diseased imaginations — worse than useless to have attempted to account by natural causes for any of the extraordinary coincidences and events of which he had spoken. Briefly as he had referred to Miss Elmslie, he had said enough to show me that the only hope of the poor girl who loved him best and had known him longest of any one, was in humouring his delusions to the last. How faithfully she still clung to the belief that she could restore him! How resolutely was she sacrificing herself to his morbid fancies, in the hope of a happy future that might never come! Little as I knew of Miss Elmslie, the mere thought of her situation, as I now reflected on it, made me feel sick at heart.

“They call me ‘Mad Monkton!’” he exclaimed, suddenly breaking the silence between us during the last few minutes. “Here and in England everybody believes I am out of my senses, except Ada and you. She has been my salvation; and you will be my salvation too. Something told me that, when I first met you walking in the Villa Reale. I struggled against

the strong desire that was in me to trust my secret to you; but I could resist it no longer when I saw you to-night at the ball — the phantom seemed to draw me on to you, as you stood alone in the quiet room. Tell me more of that idea of yours about finding the place where the duel was fought. If I set out to-morrow to seek for it myself, where must I go to first? — where?" He stopped; his strength was evidently becoming exhausted, and his mind was growing confused. "What am I to do? I can't remember. You know everything — will you not help me? My misery has made me unable to help myself!"

He stopped, murmured something about failing if he went to the frontier alone, and spoke confusedly of delays that might be fatal; then tried to utter the name of "Ada;" but in pronouncing the first letter his voice faltered, and turning abruptly from me he burst into tears.

My pity for him got the better of my prudence at that moment, and without thinking of responsibilities, I promised at once to do for him whatever he asked. The wild triumph in his expression, as he started up and seized my hand, showed me that I had better have been more cautious; but it was too late now to retract what I had said. The next best thing to do was to try if I could not induce him to compose himself a little, and then to go away and think coolly over the whole affair by myself.

"Yes, yes," he rejoined, in answer to the few words I now spoke to try and calm him, "don't be

afraid about me. After what you have said, I'll answer for my own coolness and composure under all emergencies. I have been so long used to the apparition that I hardly feel its presence at all except on rare occasions. Besides, I have here, in this little packet of letters, the medicine for every malady of the sick heart. They are Ada's letters; I read them to calm me whenever my misfortune seems to get the better of my endurance. I wanted that half hour to read them in to-night, before you came, to make myself fit to see you; and I shall go through them again after you are gone. So, once more don't be afraid about me. I know I shall succeed with your help; and Ada shall thank you as you deserve to be thanked when we get back to England. If you hear the fools at Naples talk about my being mad, don't trouble yourself to contradict them: the scandal is so contemptible that it must end by contradicting itself."

I left him, promising to return early the next day.

When I got back to my hotel, I felt that any idea of sleeping, after all that I had seen and heard, was out of the question. So I lit my pipe, and sitting by the window — how it refreshed my mind just then to look at the calm moonlight! — tried to think what it would be best to do. In the first place, any appeal to doctors or to Alfred's friends in England was out of the question. I could not persuade myself that his intellect was sufficiently disordered to justify me, under existing circumstances, in disclosing the secret which he had entrusted to my keeping. In the second place,

all attempts on my part to induce him to abandon the idea of searching out his uncle's remains would be utterly useless after what I had incautiously said to him. Having settled these two conclusions, the only really great difficulty which remained to perplex me was whether I was justified in aiding him to execute his extraordinary purpose.

Supposing that with my help he found Mr. Monkton's body, and took it back with him to England, was it right in me thus to lend myself to promoting the marriage which would most likely follow these events — a marriage which it might be the duty of everyone to prevent at all hazards? This set me thinking about the extent of his madness, or to speak more mildly and more correctly, of his delusion. Sane he certainly was on all ordinary subjects; nay, in all the narrative parts of what he had said to me on this very evening he had spoken clearly and connectedly. As for the story of the apparition, other men, with intellects as clear as the intellects of their neighbours, had fancied themselves pursued by a phantom, and had even written about it in a high strain of philosophical speculation. It was plain that the real hallucination in the case now before me lay in Monkton's conviction of the truth of the old prophecy, and in his idea that the fancied apparition was a supernatural warning to him to evade its denunciations. And it was equally clear that both delusions had been produced, in the first instance, by the lonely life he had led, acting on a naturally excitable temperament, which was rendered

further liable to moral disease by an hereditary taint of insanity.

Was this curable? Miss Elmslie, who knew him far better than I did, seemed by her conduct to think so. Had I any reason or right to determine off-hand that she was mistaken? Supposing I refused to go to the frontier with him, he would then most certainly depart by himself, to commit all sorts of errors, and perhaps to meet with all sorts of accidents; while I, an idle man, with my time entirely at my own disposal, was stopping at Naples, and leaving him to his fate after I had suggested the plan of his expedition, and had encouraged him to confide in me. In this way I kept turning the subject over and over again in my mind — being quite free, let me add, from looking at it in any other than a practical point of view. I firmly believed, as a derider of all ghost stories, that Alfred was deceiving himself in fancying that he had seen the apparition of his uncle before the news of Mr. Monkton's death reached England; and I was on this account therefore uninfluenced by the slightest infection of my unhappy friend's delusions, when I at last fairly decided to accompany him in his extraordinary search. Possibly my harum-scarum fondness for excitement at that time, biassed me a little in forming my resolution; but I must add, in common justice to myself, that I also acted from motives of real sympathy for Monkton, and from a sincere wish to allay, if I could, the anxiety of the poor girl who was still so faithfully waiting and hoping for him far away in England.

Certain arrangements preliminary to our departure, which I found myself obliged to make after a second interview with Alfred, betrayed the object of our journey to most of our Neapolitan friends. The astonishment of everybody was of course unbounded, and the nearly universal suspicion that I must be as mad in my way as Monkton himself, showed itself pretty plainly in my presence. Some people actually tried to combat my resolution by telling me what a shameless profligate Stephen Monkton had been — as if I had a strong personal interest in hunting out his remains! Ridicule moved me as little as any arguments of this sort; my mind was made up, and I was as obstinate then as I am now.

In two days' time I had got everything ready, and had ordered the travelling carriage to the door some hours earlier than we had originally settled. We were jovially threatened with "a parting cheer" by all our English acquaintances, and I thought it desirable to avoid this on my friend's account; for he had been more excited, as it was, by the preparations for the journey than I at all liked. Accordingly, soon after sunrise, without a soul in the street to stare at us, we privately left Naples.

Nobody will wonder, I think, that I experienced some difficulty in realising my own position, and shrank instinctively from looking forward a single day into the future, when I now found myself starting, in company with "Mad Monkton," to hunt for the body of a dead duellist all along the frontier line of the Roman states!

CHAPTER V.

I HAD settled it in my own mind that we had better make the town of Fondi, close on the frontier, our head-quarters, to begin with; and I had arranged, with the assistance of the Embassy, that the leaden coffin should follow us so far, securely nailed up in its packing case. Besides our passports, we were well furnished with letters of introduction to the local authorities at most of the important frontier towns, and to crown all, we had money enough at our command (thanks to Monkton's vast fortune) to make sure of the services of anyone whom we wanted to assist us, all along our line of search. These various resources ensured us every facility for action — provided always that we succeeded in discovering the body of the dead duellist. But, in the very probable event of our failing to do this, our future prospects — more especially after the responsibility I had undertaken — were of anything but an agreeable nature to contemplate. I confess I felt uneasy, almost hopeless, as we posted, in the dazzling Italian sunshine, along the road to Fondi.

We made an easy two days' journey of it; for I had insisted, on Monkton's account, that we should travel slowly.

On the first day the excessive agitation of my companion a little alarmed me; he showed, in many

ways, more symptoms of a disordered mind than I had yet observed in him. On the second day, however, he seemed to get accustomed to contemplate calmly the new idea of the search on which we were bent, and, except on one point, he was cheerful and composed enough. Whenever his dead uncle formed the subject of conversation, he still persisted — on the strength of the old prophecy, and under the influence of the apparition which he saw, or thought he saw, always — in asserting that the corpse of Stephen Monkton, wherever it was, lay yet unburied. On every other topic he deferred to me with the utmost readiness and docility; on this he maintained his strange opinion with an obstinacy which set reason and persuasion alike at defiance.

On the third day we rested at Fondi. The packing case, with the coffin in it, reached us, and was deposited in a safe place under lock and key. We engaged some mules, and found a man to act as guide who knew the country thoroughly. It occurred to me that we had better begin by confiding the real object of our journey only to the most trustworthy people we could find among the better educated classes. For this reason we followed, in one respect, the example of the fatal duelling-party, by starting, early on the morning of the fourth day, with sketch-books and colour-boxes, as if we were only artists in search of the picturesque.

After travelling some hours in a northerly direction within the Roman frontier, we halted to rest ourselves

and our mules at a wild little village, far out of the track of tourists in general.

The only person of the smallest importance in the place was the priest, and to him I addressed my first inquiries, leaving Monkton to await my return with the guide. I spoke Italian quite fluently and correctly enough for my purpose, and was extremely polite and cautious in introducing my business, but, in spite of all the pains I took, I only succeeded in frightening and bewildering the poor priest more and more with every fresh word I said to him. The idea of a duelling-party and a dead man seemed to scare him out of his senses. He bowed, fidgeted, cast his eyes up to heaven, and piteously shrugging his shoulders, told me, with rapid Italian circumlocution, that he had not the faintest idea of what I was talking about. This was my first failure. I confess I was weak enough to feel a little dispirited when I rejoined Monkton and the guide.

After the heat of the day was over, we resumed our journey.

About three miles from the village, the road, or rather cart-track, branched off in two directions. The path to the right, our guide informed us, led up among the mountains to a convent about six miles off. If we penetrated beyond the convent, we should soon reach the Neapolitan frontier. The path to the left led far inwards on the Roman territory, and would conduct us to a small town where we could sleep for the night. Now, the Roman territory presented the first and fittest

field for our search, and the convent was always within reach, supposing we returned to Fondi unsuccessful. Besides, the path to the left led over the widest part of the country we were starting to explore; and I was always for vanquishing the greatest difficulty first — so we decided manfully on turning to the left. The expedition in which this resolution involved us lasted a whole week, and produced no results. We discovered absolutely nothing, and returned to our head-quarters at Fondi, so completely baffled that we did not know whither to turn our steps next.

I was made much more uneasy by the effect of our failure on Monkton than by the failure itself. His resolution appeared to break down altogether as soon as we began to retrace our steps. He became first fretful and capricious, then silent and desponding. Finally, he sank into a lethargy of body and mind that seriously alarmed me. On the morning after our return to Fondi, he showed a strange tendency to sleep incessantly, which made me suspect the existence of some physical malady in his brain. The whole day he hardly exchanged a word with me, and seemed to be never fairly awake. Early the next morning I went into his room, and found him as silent and lethargic as ever. His servant, who was with us, informed me that Alfred had once or twice before exhibited such physical symptoms of mental exhaustion as we were now observing, during his father's lifetime at Wincot Abbey. This piece of information made me feel easier, and left my mind free to return to the con-

sideration of the errand which had brought us to Fondi.

I resolved to occupy the time until my companion got better, in prosecuting our search by myself. That path to the right hand which led to the convent had not yet been explored; if I set off to trace it, I need not be away from Monkton more than one night, and I should at least be able on my return to give him the satisfaction of knowing that one more uncertainty regarding the place of the duel had been cleared up. These considerations decided me. I left a message for my friend, in case he asked where I had gone, and set out once more for the village at which we had halted when starting on our first expedition.

Intending to walk to the convent, I parted company with the guide and the mules where the track branched off, leaving them to go back to the village and await my return.

For the first four miles the path gently ascended through an open country, then became abruptly much steeper, and led me deeper and deeper among thickets and endless woods. By the time my watch informed me that I must have nearly walked my appointed distance, the view was bounded on all sides, and the sky was shut out overhead, by an impervious screen of leaves and branches. I still followed my only guide, the steep path; and in ten minutes, emerging suddenly on a plot of tolerably clear and level ground, I saw the convent before me.

It was a dark, low, sinister-looking place. Not a

sign of life or movement was visible anywhere about it. Green stains streaked the once white façade of the chapel in all directions. Moss clustered thick in every crevice of the heavy scowling wall that surrounded the convent. Long lank weeds grew out of the fissures of roof and parapet, and drooping far downward, waved wearily in and out of the barred dormitory windows. The very cross opposite the entrance-gate, with a shocking life-sized figure in wood nailed to it, was so beset at the base with crawling creatures, and looked so slimy, green and rotten all the way up, that I absolutely shrank from it.

A bell-rope with a broken handle hung by the gate. I approached it — hesitated, I hardly knew why — looked up at the convent again, and then walked round to the back of the building, partly to gain time to consider what I had better do next; partly from an unaccountable curiosity that urged me, strangely to myself, to see all I could of the outside of the place before I attempted to gain admission at the gate.

At the back of the convent I found an outhouse, built on to the wall — a clumsy, decayed building, with the greater part of the roof fallen in, and with a jagged hole in one of its sides, where in all probability a window had once been. Behind the out-house the trees grew thicker than ever. As I looked towards them, I could not determine whether the ground beyond me rose or fell — whether it was grassy, or

earthy, or rocky. I could see nothing but the all-pervading leaves, brambles, ferns, and long grass.

Not a sound broke the oppressive stillness. No bird's note rose from the leafy wilderness around me; no voices spoke in the convent garden behind the scowling wall; no clock struck in the chapel-tower; no dog barked in the ruined outhouse. The dead silence deepened the solitude of the place inexpressibly. I began to feel it weighing on my spirits — the more because woods were never favourite places with me to walk in. The sort of pastoral happiness which poets often represent when they sing of life in the woods, never, to my mind, has half the charm of life on the mountain or in the plain. When I am in a wood, I miss the boundless loveliness of the sky, and the delicious softness that distance gives to the earthly view beneath. I feel oppressively the change which the free air suffers when it gets imprisoned among leaves, and I am always awed, rather than pleased, by that mysterious still light which shines with such a strange dim lustre in deep places among trees. It may convict me of want of taste and absence of due feeling for the marvellous beauties of vegetation, but I must frankly own that I never penetrate far into a wood without finding that the getting out of it again is the pleasantest part of my walk — the getting out on to the barest down, the wildest hill-side, the bleakest mountain-top — the getting out anywhere so that I can see the sky over me and the view before me as far as my eye can reach.

After such a confession as I have now made, it will appear surprising to no one that I should have felt the strongest possible inclination, while I stood by the ruined outhouse, to retrace my steps at once, and make the best of my way out of the wood. I had indeed actually turned to depart, when the remembrance of the errand which had brought me to the convent suddenly stayed my feet. It seemed doubtful whether I should be admitted into the building if I rang the bell; and more than doubtful, if I were let in, whether the inhabitants would be able to afford me any clue to the information of which I was in search. However, it was my duty to Monkton to leave no means of helping him in his desperate object untried; so I resolved to go round to the front of the convent again, and ring the gate-bell at all hazards.

By the merest chance I looked up as I passed the side of the outhouse where the jagged hole was, and noticed that it was pierced rather high in the wall.

As I stopped to observe this, the closeness of the atmosphere in the wood seemed to be affecting me more unpleasantly than ever.

I waited a minute and untied my cravat.

Closeness? — surely it was something more than that. The air was even more distasteful to my nostrils than to my lungs. There was some faint, indescribable smell loading it — some smell of which I had never had any previous experience — some smell which I thought (now that my attention was directed to it)

grew more and more certainly traceable to its source the nearer I advanced to the outhouse.

By the time I had tried the experiment two or three times, and had made myself sure of this fact, my curiosity became excited. There were plenty of fragments of stone and brick lying about me. I gathered some of them together, and piled them up below the hole, then mounted to the top, and, feeling rather ashamed of what I was doing, peeped into the outhouse.

The sight of horror that met my eyes the instant I looked through the hole, is as present to my memory now as if I had beheld it yesterday. I can hardly write of it at this distance of time without a thrill of the old terror running through me again to the heart.

The first impression conveyed to me, as I looked in, was of a long recumbent object, tinged with a lightish blue colour all over, extended on trestles, and bearing a certain hideous half-formed resemblance to the human face and figure. I looked again, and felt certain of it. There were the prominences of the forehead, nose, and chin, dimly shown as under a veil — there, the round outline of the chest, and the hollow below it — there, the points of the knees, and the stiff, ghastly, upturned feet. I looked again, yet more attentively. My eyes got accustomed to the dim light streaming in through the broken roof; and I satisfied myself, judging by the great length of the body from head to foot, that I was looking at the corpse of a man — a corpse that had apparently once had a sheet

spread over it — and that had lain rotting on the trestles under the open sky long enough for the linen to take the livid, light-blue tinge of mildew and decay which now covered it.

How long I remained with my eyes fixed on that dread sight of death, on that tombless, terrible wreck of humanity, poisoning the still air, and seeming even to stain the faint descending light that disclosed it, I know not. I remember a dull, distant sound among the trees, as if the breeze were rising — the slow, creeping on of the sound to near the place where I stood — the noiseless whirling fall of a dead leaf on the corpse below me, through the gap in the outhouse roof — and the effect of awakening my energies, of relaxing the heavy strain on my mind, which even the slight change wrought in the scene I beheld by the falling leaf, produced in me immediately. I descended to the ground, and, sitting down on the heap of stones, wiped away the thick perspiration which covered my face, and which I now became aware of for the first time. It was something more than the hideous spectacle unexpectedly offered to my eyes, which had shaken my nerves, as I felt that they were shaken now. Monkton's prediction that, if we succeeded in discovering his uncle's body, we should find it unburied, recurred to me the instant I saw the trestles and their ghastly burden. I felt assured on the instant that I had found the dead man — the old prophecy recurred to my memory — a strange yearning sorrow, a vague foreboding of ill, an inexplicable terror, as I

thought of the poor lad who was awaiting my return in the distant town, struck through me with a chill of superstitious dread, robbed me of my judgment and resolution, and left me, when I had at last recovered myself, weak and dizzy, as if I had just suffered under some pang of overpowering physical pain.

I hastened round to the convent gate, and rang impatiently at the bell — waited a little while, and rang again — then heard footsteps.

In the middle of the gate, just opposite my face, there was a small sliding panel, not more than a few inches long; this was presently pushed aside from within. I saw, through a bit of iron grating, two dull, light grey eyes staring vacantly at me, and heard a feeble husky voice saying: —

“What may you please to want?”

“I am a traveller —” I began.

“We live in a miserable place. We have nothing to show travellers here.”

“I don’t come to see anything. I have an important question to ask, which I believe some one in this convent will be able to answer. If you are not willing to let me in, at least come out and speak to me here.”

“Are you alone?”

“Quite alone.”

“Are there no women with you?”

“None.”

The gate was slowly unbarred; and an old Capuchin, very infirm, very suspicious, and very dirty,

stood before me. I was far too excited and impatient to waste any time in prefatory phrases; so telling the monk at once how I had looked through the hole in the outhouse, and what I had seen inside, I asked him in plain terms who the man had been whose corpse I had beheld, and why the body was left unburied?

The old Capuchin listened to me with watery eyes that twinkled suspiciously. He had a battered tin snuff-box in his hand; and his finger and thumb slowly chased a few scattered grains of snuff round and round the inside of the box all the time I was speaking. When I had done, he shook his head, and said "that was certainly an ugly sight in their outhouse; one of the ugliest sights, he felt sure, that ever I had seen in all my life!"

"I don't want to talk of the sight," I rejoined, impatiently; "I want to know who the man was, how he died, and why he is not decently buried. Can you tell me?"

The monk's finger and thumb having captured three or four grains of snuff at last, he slowly drew them into his nostrils, holding the box open under his nose the while, to prevent the possibility of wasting even one grain, sniffed once or twice, luxuriously — closed the box — then looked at me again, with his eyes watering and twinkling more suspiciously than before.

"Yes," said the monk, "that's an ugly sight in our outhouse — a very ugly sight, certainly!"

I never had more difficulty in keeping my temper

in my life, than at that moment. I succeeded, however, in repressing a very disrespectful expression on the subject of monks in general, which was on the tip of my tongue, and made another attempt to conquer the old man's exasperating reserve. Fortunately for my chances of succeeding with him, I was a snuff-taker myself; and I had a box full of excellent English snuff in my pocket, which I now produced as a bribe. It was my last resource.

"I thought your box seemed empty just now," said I; "will you try a pinch out of mine?"

The offer was accepted with an almost youthful alacrity of gesture. The Capuchin took the largest pinch I ever saw held between any man's finger and thumb, inhaled it slowly, without spilling a single grain — half closed his eyes — and, wagging his head gently, patted me paternally on the back.

"Oh, my son!" said the monk, "what delectable snuff! Oh, my son and amiable traveller, give the spiritual father who loves you, yet another tiny, tiny pinch!"

"Let me fill your box for you. I shall have plenty left for myself."

The battered tin snuff-box was given to me before I had done speaking — the paternal hand patted my back more approvingly than ever — the feeble, husky voice grew glib and eloquent in my praise. I had evidently found out the weak side of the old Capuchin; and, on returning him his box, I took instant advantage of the discovery.

"Excuse my troubling you on the subject again," I said, "but I have particular reasons for wanting to hear all that you can tell me in explanation of that horrible sight in the outhouse."

"Come in," answered the monk.

He drew me inside the gate, closed it, and then leading the way across a grass grown courtyard, looking out on a weedy kitchen garden, showed me into a long room with a low ceiling, a dirty dresser, a few rudely-carved stall seats, and one or two grim mildewed pictures for ornaments. This was the sacristy.

"There's nobody here, and it's nice and cool," said the old Capuchin. It was so damp that I actually shivered. "Would you like to see the church?" said the monk; "a jewel of a church, if we could only keep it in repair; but we can't. Ah! malediction and misery, we are too poor to keep our church in repair!"

Here he shook his head, and began fumbling with a large bunch of keys.

"Never mind the church now!" said I. "Can you, or can you not, tell me what I want to know?"

"Everything, from beginning to end — absolutely everything! Why, I answered the gate bell — I always answer the gate bell here," said the Capuchin.

"What, in heaven's name, has the gate bell to do with the unburied corpse in your outhouse?"

"Listen, son of mine, and you shall know. Some time ago — some months — ah, me, I'm old; I've lost my memory; I don't know how many months — ah! miserable me, what a very old, old monk I am!"

Here he comforted himself with another pinch of my snuff.

"Never mind the exact time," said I. "I don't care about that."

"Good," said the Capuchin. "Now I can go on. Well, let us say, it is some months ago — we in this convent are all at breakfast — wretched, wretched breakfasts, son of mine, in this convent! — we are at breakfast, and we hear *bang! bang!* twice over. 'Guns,' says I. 'What are they shooting for?' says brother Jeremy. 'Game,' says brother Vincent. 'Aha! game,' says brother Jeremy. 'If I hear more, I shall send out and discover what it means,' says the father superior. We hear no more, and we go on with our wretched breakfasts."

"Where did the report of fire-arms come from?" I inquired.

"From down below, beyond the big trees at the back of the convent, where there's some clear ground — nice ground, if it wasn't for the pools and puddles. But, ah misery! how damp we are in these parts! how very, very damp!"

"Well, what happened after the report of fire-arms?"

"You shall hear. We are still at breakfast, all silent — for what have we to talk about here? What have we but our devotions, our kitchen garden, and our wretched, wretched bits of breakfasts and dinners? I say we are all silent, when there comes suddenly such a ring at the bell as never was heard before — a

very devil of a ring — a ring that caught us all with our bits — our wretched, wretched bits! — in our mouths, and stopped us before we could swallow them. ‘Go, brother of mine!’ says the father superior to me — ‘go, it is your duty — go to the gate.’ I am brave — a very lion of a Capuchin. I slip out on tip-toe — I wait — I listen — I pull back our little shutter in the gate — I wait, I listen again — I peep through the hole — nothing, absolutely nothing, that I can see. I am brave — I am not to be daunted. What do I do next? I open the gate. Ah! Sacred Mother of Heaven, what do I behold lying all along our threshold? A man — dead! — a big man; bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than anybody in this convent — buttoned up tight in a fine coat, with black eyes, staring, staring up at the sky; and blood soaking through and through the front of his shirt. What do I do? I scream once — I scream twice — and run back to the father superior!”

All the particulars of the fatal duel which I had gleaned from the French newspaper in Monkton’s room at Naples, recurred vividly to my memory. The suspicion that I had felt when I looked into the outhouse, became a certainty as I listened to the old monk’s last words.

“So far I understand,” said I. “The corpse I have just seen in the outhouse, is the corpse of the man whom you found dead outside your gate. Now tell me why you have not given the remains decent burial?”

“Wait — wait — wait,” answered the Capuchin.

"The father superior hears me scream, and comes out; we all run together to the gate; we lift up the big man, and look at him close. Dead! dead as this" (smacking the dresser with his hand). "We look again, and see a bit of paper pinned to the collar of his coat. Aha! son of mine, you start at that. I thought I should make you start at last."

I had started indeed. That paper was doubtless the leaf mentioned in the second's unfinished narrative as having been torn out of his pocket-book, and inscribed with the statement of how the dead man had lost his life. If proof positive were wanted to identify the dead body, here was such proof found.

"What do you think was written on the bit of paper?" continued the Capuchin. "We read, and shudder. This dead man has been killed in a duel — he, the desperate, the miserable, has died in the commission of mortal sin; and the men who saw the killing of him, ask us Capuchins, holy men, servants of Heaven, children of our lord the pope — they ask *us* to give him burial! Oh! but we are outraged when we read that; we groan, we wring our hands, we turn away, we tear our beards, we —"

"Wait one moment," said I, seeing that the old man was heating himself with his narrative, and was likely, unless I stopped him, to talk more and more fluently to less and less purpose — "wait a moment. Have you preserved the paper that was pinned to the dead man's coat; and can I look at it?"

The Capuchin seemed on the point of giving me

an answer, when he suddenly checked himself. I saw his eyes wander away from my face, and at the same moment heard a door softly opened and closed again behind me.

Looking round immediately, I observed another monk in the sacristy—a tall, lean, black-bearded man, in whose presence my old friend with the snuff-box suddenly became quite decorous and devotional to look at. I suspected I was in the presence of the father superior; and I found that I was right the moment he addressed me.

“I am the father superior of this convent,” he said in quiet, clear tones, and looking me straight in the face while he spoke, with coldly attentive eyes. “I have heard the latter part of your conversation, and I wish to know why you are so particularly anxious to see the piece of paper that was pinned to the dead man’s coat?”

The coolness with which he avowed that he had been listening, and the quietly imperative manner in which he put his concluding question perplexed and startled me. I hardly knew at first what tone I ought to take in answering him. He observed my hesitation, and attributing it to the wrong cause, signed to the old Capuchin to retire. Humbly stroking his long grey beard, and furtively consoling himself with a private pinch of the “delectable snuff,” my venerable friend shuffled out of the room, making a profound obeisance at the door, just before he disappeared.

"Now," said the father superior, as coldly as ever; "I am waiting, sir, for your reply."

"You shall have it in the fewest possible words," said I, answering him in his own tone. "I find to my disgust and horror that there is an unburied corpse in an outhouse attached to your convent. I believe that corpse to be the body of an English gentleman of rank and fortune, who was killed in a duel. I have come into this neighbourhood, with the nephew and only relation of the slain man, for the express purpose of recovering his remains; and I wish to see the paper found on the body, because I believe that paper will identify it to the satisfaction of the relative to whom I have referred. Do you find my reply sufficiently straightforward? And do you mean to give me permission to look at the paper?"

"I am satisfied with your reply, and see no reason for refusing you a sight of the paper," said the father superior; "but I have something to say first. In speaking of the impression produced on you by beholding the corpse, you used the words 'disgust' and 'horror.' This license of expression in relation to what you have seen in the precincts of a convent, proves to me that you are out of the pale of the Holy Catholic Church. You have no right, therefore, to expect any explanation; but I will give you one, nevertheless, as a favour. The slain man died, unabsolved, in the commission of mortal sin. We infer so much from the paper which we found on his body; and we know, by the evidence of our own eyes and ears, that he was

killed on the territories of the church, and in the act of committing direct violation of those special laws against the crime of duelling, the strict enforcement of which the holy father himself has urged on the faithful throughout his dominions, by letters signed with his own hand. Inside this convent the ground is consecrated; and we Catholics are not accustomed to bury the outlaws of our religion, the enemies of our Holy Father, and the violators of our most sacred laws, in consecrated ground. Outside this convent, we have no rights and no power; and, if we had both, we should remember that we are monks, not gravediggers, and that the only burial with which *we* can have any concern, is burial with the prayers of the church. That is all the explanation I think it necessary to give. Wait for me here, and you shall see the paper." With those words the father superior left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

I had hardly time to think over this bitter and ungracious explanation, and to feel a little piqued by the language and manner of the person who had given it to me, before the father superior returned with the paper in his hand. He placed it before me on the dresser; and I read hurriedly traced in pencil, the following lines: —

"This paper is attached to the body of the late Mr. Stephen Monkton, an Englishman of distinction. He has been shot in a duel, conducted with perfect gallantry and honour on both sides. His body is placed at the door of this convent, to receive burial at the

hands of its inmates, the survivors of the encounter being obliged to separate and secure their safety by immediate flight. I, the second of the slain man, and the writer of this explanation, certify, on my word of honour as a gentleman, that the shot which killed my principal on the instant was fired fairly, in the strictest accordance with the rules laid down beforehand for the conduct of the duel.

(Signed)

"F."

"F." I recognised easily enough as the initial letter of Monsieur Foulon's name, the second of Mr. Monkton, who had died of consumption at Paris.

The discovery and the identification were now complete. Nothing remained but to break the news to Alfred, and to get permission to remove the remains in the outhouse. I began almost to doubt the evidence of my own senses, when I reflected that the apparently impracticable object with which we had left Naples was already, by the merest chance, virtually accomplished.

"The evidence of the paper is decisive," said I, handing it back. "There can be no doubt that the remains in the outhouse are the remains of which we have been in search. May I inquire if any obstacles will be thrown in our way, should the late Mr. Monkton's nephew wish to remove his uncle's body to the family burial-place in England?"

"Where is this nephew?" asked the father superior.

"He is now awaiting my return at the town of Fondi."

"Is he in a position to prove his relationship?"

"Certainly; he has papers with him which will place it beyond a doubt."

"Let him satisfy the civil authorities of his claim, and he need expect no obstacle to his wishes from anyone here."

I was in no humour for talking a moment longer with my sour-tempered companion than I could help. The day was wearing on fast; and, whether night overtook me or not, I was resolved never to stop on my return till I got back to Fondi. Accordingly, after telling the father superior that he might expect to hear from me again immediately, I made my bow, and hastened out of the sacristy.

At the convent gate stood my old friend with the tin snuff-box, waiting to let me out.

"Bless you, my son," said the venerable recluse, giving me a farewell pat on the shoulder; "come back soon to your spiritual father, who loves you; and amiably favour him with another tiny, tiny pinch of the delectable snuff."

CHAPTER VI.

I RETURNED at the top of my speed to the village where I had left the mules, had the animals saddled immediately, and succeeded in getting back to Fondi a little before sunset.

While ascending the stairs of our hotel, I suffered under the most painful uncertainty as to how I should best communicate the news of my discovery to Alfred. If I could not succeed in preparing him properly for my tidings, the results — with such an organization as his — might be fatal. On opening the door of his room, I felt by no means sure of myself; and when I confronted him, his manner of receiving me took me so much by surprise that, for a moment or two, I lost my self-possession altogether.

Every trace of the lethargy in which he was sunk when I had last seen him had disappeared. His eyes were bright, his cheeks deeply flushed. As I entered, he started up, and refused my offered hand.

"You have not treated me like a friend," he said, passionately; "you had no right to continue the search unless I searched with you — you had no right to leave me here alone. I was wrong to trust you: you are no better than all the rest of them."

I had by this time recovered a little from my first astonishment, and was able to reply before he could say anything more. It was quite useless, in his present

state, to reason with him, or to defend myself. I determined to risk everything, and break my news to him at once.

"You will treat me more justly, Monkton, when you know that I have been doing you good service during my absence," I said. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, the object for which we have left Naples may be nearer attainment by both of us than —"

The flush left his cheeks almost in an instant. Some expression in my face, or some tone in my voice, of which I was not conscious, had revealed to his nervously-quickenened perception more than I had intended that he should know at first. His eyes fixed themselves intently on mine; his hand grasped my arm; and he said to me in an eager whisper: —

"Tell me the truth at once. Have you found him?"

It was too late to hesitate. I answered in the affirmative.

"Buried or unburied?"

His voice rose abruptly as he put the question, and his unoccupied hand fastened on my other arm.

"Unburied."

I had hardly uttered the word before the blood flew back into his cheeks; his eyes flashed again as they looked into mine, and he burst into a fit of triumphant laughter, which shocked and startled me inexpressibly.

"What did I tell you? What do you say to the old prophecy now?" he cried, dropping his hold on

my arms, and pacing backward and forwards in the room. "Own you were wrong. Own it, as all Naples shall own it, when once I have got him safe in his coffin!"

His laughter grew more and more violent. I tried to quiet him in vain. His servant and the landlord of the inn entered the room; but they only added fuel to the fire, and I made them go out again. As I shut the door on them, I observed lying on a table near at hand the packet of letters from Miss Elmslie, which my unhappy friend preserved with such care, and read and re-read with such unfailing devotion. Looking towards me just when I passed by the table, the letters caught his eye. The new hope for the future, in connexion with the writer of them, which my news was already awakening in his heart, seemed to overwhelm him in an instant at sight of the treasured memorials that reminded him of his betrothed wife. His laughter ceased, his face changed, he ran to the table, caught the letters up in his hand, looked from them to me for one moment with an altered expression which went to my heart, then sank down on his knees at the table, laid his face on the letters, and burst into tears. I let the new emotion have its way uninterruptedly, and quitted the room without saying a word. When I returned, after a lapse of some little time, I found him sitting quietly in his chair, reading one of the letters from the packet which rested on his knee.

His look was kindness itself; his gesture almost womanly in its gentleness as he rose to meet me, and anxiously held out his hand.

He was quite calm enough now to hear in detail all that I had to tell him. I suppressed nothing but the particulars of the state in which I had found the corpse. I assumed no right of direction as to the share he was to take in our future proceedings, with the exception of insisting beforehand that he should leave the absolute superintendence of the removal of the body to me, and that he should be satisfied with a sight of M. Foulon's paper, after receiving my assurance that the remains placed in the coffin were really and truly the remains of which we had been in search.

"Your nerves are not so strong as mine," I said, by way of apology for my apparent dictation; "and for that reason I must beg leave to assume the leadership in all that we have now to do, until I see the leaden coffin soldered down and safe in your possession. After that, I shall resign all my functions to you."

"I want words to thank you for your kindness," he answered. "No brother could have borne with me more affectionately, or helped me more patiently, than you."

He stopped, and grew thoughtful, then occupied himself in tying up slowly and carefully the packet of Miss Elmslie's letters, and then looked suddenly towards the vacant wall behind me, with that strange expression the meaning of which I knew so well. Since we had left Naples, I had purposely avoided exciting him by talking on the useless and shocking subject of the apparition by which he believed himself to be perpetually

followed. Just now, however, he seemed so calm and collected — so little likely to be violently agitated by any allusion to the dangerous topic — that I ventured to speak out boldly.

"Does the Phantom still appear to you," I asked, "as it appeared at Naples?"

He looked at me and smiled.

"Did I not tell you that it followed me everywhere?" His eyes wandered back again to the vacant space, and he went on speaking in that direction as if he had been continuing the conversation with some third person in the room. "We shall part," he said slowly and softly, "when the empty place is filled in Wincot vault. Then I shall stand with Ada before the altar in the Abbey chapel; and when my eyes meet hers, they will see the tortured face no more."

Saying this, he leaned his head on his hand, sighed, and began repeating softly to himself the lines of the old prophecy: —

When in Wincot vault a place
Waits for one of Monkton's race;
When that one forlorn shall lie
Graveless under open sky,
Beggared of six feet of earth,
Though lord of acres from his birth —
That shall be a certain sign
Of the end of Monkton's line.
Dwindling ever faster, faster,
Dwindling to the last left master;
From mortal ken, from light of day,
Monkton's race shall pass away.

Fancying that he pronounced the last lines a little incoherently, I tried to make him change the subject.

He took no notice of what I said, and went on talking to himself.

"Monkton's race shall pass away!" he repeated; "but not with *me*. The fatality hangs over *my* head no longer. I shall bury the unburied dead; I shall fill the vacant place in Wincot vault. And then — then the new life, the life with Ada!" — That name seemed to recall him to himself. He drew his travelling desk towards him, placed the packet of letters in it, and then took out a sheet of paper. "I am going to write to Ada," he said, turning to me, "and tell her the good news. Her happiness, when she knows it, will be even greater than mine."

Worn out by the events of the day, I left him writing, and went to bed. I was, however, either too anxious or too tired to sleep. In this waking condition, my mind naturally occupied itself with the discovery at the convent, and with the events to which that discovery would in all probability lead. As I thought on the future, a depression for which I could not account weighed on my spirits. There was not the slightest reason for the vaguely melancholy forebodings that oppressed me. The remains, to the finding of which my unhappy friend attached so much importance, had been traced; they would certainly be placed at his disposal in a few days; he might take them to England by the first merchant vessel that sailed from Naples; and, the gratification of his strange caprice thus accomplished, there was at least some reason to hope that his mind might recover its tone, and that the new

life he would lead at Wincot might result in making him a happy man. Such considerations as these were, in themselves, certainly not calculated to exert any melancholy influence over me; and yet, all through the night, the same inconceivable, unaccountable depression weighed heavily on my spirits — heavily through the hours of darkness — heavily, even when I walked out to breathe the first freshness of the early morning air.

With the day came the all-engrossing business of opening negotiations with the authorities.

Only those who have had to deal with Italian officials can imagine how our patience was tried by every one with whom we came in contact. We were bandied about from one authority to the other, were stared at, cross-questioned, mystified — not in the least because the case presented any special difficulties or intricacies, but because it was absolutely necessary that every civil dignitary to whom we applied should assert his own importance by leading us to our object in the most round-about manner possible. After our first day's experience of official life in Italy, I left the absurd formalities, which we had no choice but to perform, to be accomplished by Alfred alone, and applied myself to considering the really serious question of how the remains in the convent outhouse were to be safely removed.

The best plan that suggested itself to me was to write to a friend at Rome, where I knew that it was a custom to embalm the bodies of high dignitaries of the church, and where, I consequently inferred, such

chemical assistance as was needed in our emergency might be obtained. I simply stated in my letter that the removal of the body was imperative, then described the condition in which I had found it, and engaged that no expense on our part should be spared if the right person or persons could be found to help us. Here again more difficulties interposed themselves, and more useless formalities were to be gone through, but, in the end, patience, perseverance, and money triumphed, and two men came expressly from Rome to undertake the duties we required of them.

It is unnecessary that I should shock the reader by entering into any detail in this part of my narrative. When I have said the progress of decay was so far suspended by chemical means as to allow of the remains being placed in the coffin, and to ensure their being transported to England with perfect safety and convenience, I have said enough. After ten days had been wasted in useless delays and difficulties, I had the satisfaction of seeing the convent outhouse empty at last; passed through a final ceremony of snuff-taking, or rather, of snuff-giving, with the old Capuchin, and ordered the travelling carriages to be ready at the inn door. Hardly a month had elapsed since our departure, when we entered Naples, successful in the achievement of a design which had been ridiculed as wildly impracticable by every friend of ours who had heard of it.

The first object to be accomplished on our return was to obtain the means of carrying the coffin to England — by sea, as a matter of course. All inquiries

after a merchant vessel on the point of sailing for any British port led to the most unsatisfactory results. There was only one way of ensuring the immediate transportation of the remains to England, and that was to hire a vessel. Impatient to return, and resolved not to lose sight of the coffin till he had seen it placed in Wincot vault, Monkton decided immediately on hiring the first ship that could be obtained. The vessel in port, which we were informed could soonest be got ready for sea, was a Sicilian brig; and this vessel my friend accordingly engaged. The best dockyard artisans that could be got were set to work, and the smartest captain and crew to be picked up on an emergency in Naples, were chosen to navigate the brig.

Monkton, after again expressing in the warmest terms his gratitude for the services I had rendered him, disclaimed any intention of asking me to accompany him on the voyage to England. Greatly to his surprise and delight, however, I offered of my own accord to take passage in the brig. The strange coincidences I had witnessed, the extraordinary discovery I had hit on, since our first meeting in Naples, had made his one great interest in life my one great interest for the time being, as well. I shared none of his delusions, poor fellow; but it is hardly an exaggeration to say that my eagerness to follow our remarkable adventure to its end was as great as his anxiety to see the coffin laid in Wincot vault. Curiosity influenced me, I am afraid, almost as strongly as friendship, when I offered myself as the companion of his voyage home.

We set sail for England on a calm and lovely afternoon.

For the first time since I had known him, Monkton seemed to be in high spirits. He talked and jested on all sorts of subjects, and laughed at me for allowing my cheerfulness to be affected by the dread of seasickness. I had really no such fear; it was my excuse to my friend for a return of that unaccountable depression under which I had suffered at Fondi. Everything was in our favour; everybody on board the brig was in good spirits. The captain was delighted with the vessel; the crew, Italians and Maltese, were in high glee at the prospect of making a short voyage on high wages in a well-provisioned ship. I alone felt heavy at heart. There was no valid reason that I could assign to myself for the melancholy that oppressed me, and yet I struggled against it in vain.

Late on our first night at sea, I made a discovery which was by no means calculated to restore my spirits to their usual equilibrium. Monkton was in the cabin, on the floor of which had been placed the packing-case containing the coffin; and I was on deck. The wind had fallen almost to a calm, and I was lazily watching the sails of the brig as they flapped from time to time against the masts, when the captain approached, and, drawing me out of hearing of the man at the helm, whispered in my ear —

“There’s something wrong among the men forward. Did you observe how suddenly they all became silent just before sunset?”

I had observed it, and told him so.

"There's a Maltese boy on board," pursued the captain, "who is a smart lad enough, but a bad one to deal with. I have found out that he has been telling the men there is a dead body inside that packing case of your friend's in the cabin."

My heart sank as he spoke. Knowing the superstitious irrationality of sailors — of foreign sailors especially — I had taken care to spread a report on board the brig, before the coffin was shipped, that the packing-case contained a valuable marble statue which Mr. Monkton prized highly, and was unwilling to trust out of his own sight. How could this Maltese boy have discovered that the pretended statue was a human corpse? As I pondered over the question, my suspicions fixed themselves on Monkton's servant, who spoke Italian fluently, and whom I knew to be an incorrigible gossip. The man denied it when I charged him with betraying us, but I have never believed his denial to this day.

"The little imp won't say where he picked up this notion of his about the dead body," continued the captain. "It's not my place to pry into secrets; but I advise you to call the crew aft, and contradict the boy, whether he speaks the truth or not. The men are a parcel of fools who believe in ghosts, and all the rest of it. Some of them say they would never have signed our articles if they had known they were going to sail with a dead man; others only grumble; but I'm afraid

we shall have some trouble with them all, in case of rough weather, unless the boy is contradicted by you or the other gentleman. The men say that if either you or your friend tell them on your words of honour that the Maltese is a liar, they will hand him up to be rope's-ended accordingly; but that if you won't, they have made up their minds to believe the boy."

Here the captain paused, and awaited my answer. I could give him none. I felt hopeless under our desperate emergency. To get the boy punished by giving my word of honour to support a direct falsehood, was not to be thought of even for a moment. What other means of extrication from this miserable dilemma remained? None that I could think of. I thanked the captain for his attention to our interests, told him I would take time to consider what course I should pursue, and begged that he would say nothing to my friend about the discovery he had made. He promised to be silent, sulkily enough, and walked away from me.

We had expected the breeze to spring up with the morning, but no breeze came. As it wore on towards noon, the atmosphere became insufferably sultry, and the sea looked as smooth as glass. I saw the captain's eye turn often and anxiously to windward. Far away in that direction, and alone in the blue heaven, I observed a little black cloud, and asked if it would bring us any wind.

"More than we want," the captain replied, shortly;

and then, to my astonishment, ordered the crew aloft to take in sail. The execution of this manœuvre showed but too plainly the temper of the men; they did their work sulkily and slowly, grumbling and murmuring among themselves. The captain's manner, as he urged them on with oaths and threats, convinced me we were in danger. I looked again to windward. The one little cloud had enlarged to a great bank of murky vapour, and the sea at the horizon had changed in colour.

"The squall will be on us before we know where we are," said the captain. "Go below; you will be only in the way here."

I descended to the cabin, and prepared Monkton for what was coming. He was still questioning me about what I had observed on deck, when the storm burst on us. We felt the little brig strain for an instant as if she would part in two, then she seemed to be swinging round with us, then to be quite still for a moment, trembling in every timber. Last, came a shock which hurled us from our seats, a deafening crash, and a flood of water pouring into the cabin. We clambered, half-drowned, to the deck. The brig had, in the nautical phrase, "broached to," and she now lay on her beam ends.

Before I could make out anything distinctly in the horrible confusion, except the one tremendous certainty that we were entirely at the mercy of the sea, I heard a voice from the fore part of the ship which stilled the

clamouring and shouting of the rest of the crew in an instant. The words were in Italian, but I understood their fatal meaning only too easily. We had sprung a leak, and the sea was pouring into the ship's hold like the race of a mill-stream. The captain did not lose his presence of mind in this fresh emergency. He called for his axe to cut away the foremast, and ordering some of the crew to help him, directed the others to rig out the pumps.

The words had hardly passed his lips, before the men broke into open mutiny. With a savage look at me, their ringleader declared that the passengers might do as they pleased, but that he and his messmates were determined to take to the boat, and leave the accursed ship, and *the dead man in her*, to go to the bottom together. As he spoke there was a shout among the sailors, and I observed some of them pointing derisively behind me. Looking round, I saw Monkton, who had hitherto kept close at my side, making his way back to the cabin. I followed him directly, but the water and confusion on deck, and the impossibility, from the position of the brig, of moving the feet without the slow assistance of the hands, so impeded my progress that it was impossible for me to overtake him. When I had got below, he was crouched upon the coffin, with the water on the cabin floor whirling and splashing about him, as the ship heaved and plunged. I saw a warning brightness in his eyes, a warning flush on his cheek, as I approached and said to him: —

"There is nothing left for it, Alfred, but to bow to our misfortune, and do the best we can to save our lives."

"Save yours," he cried, waving his hand to me, "for *you* have a future before you. Mine is gone when this coffin goes to the bottom. If the ship sinks, I shall know that the fatality is accomplished, and shall sink with her."

I saw that he was in no state to be reasoned with or persuaded, and raised myself again to the deck. The men were cutting away all obstacles, so as to launch the long boat, placed amidships, over the depressed bulwark of the brig, as she lay on her side; and the captain, after having made a last vain exertion to restore his authority, was looking on at them in silence. The violence of the squall seemed already to be spending itself, and I asked whether there was really no chance for us if we remained by the ship. The captain answered that there might have been the best chance if the men had obeyed his orders, but that now there was none. Knowing that I could place no dependence on the presence of mind of Monkton's servant, I confided to the captain, in the fewest and plainest words, the condition of my unhappy friend, and asked if I might depend on his help. He nodded his head, and we descended together to the cabin. Even at this day it costs me pain to write of the terrible necessity to which the strength and obstinacy of Monkton's delusion reduced us, in the last resort. We

were compelled to secure his hands, and drag him by main force to the deck. The men were on the point of launching the boat, and refused at first to receive us into it.

"You cowards!" cried the captain, "have we got the dead man with us this time? Isn't he going to the bottom along with the brig? Who are you afraid of when we get into the boat?"

This sort of appeal produced the desired effect; the men became ashamed of themselves, and retracted their refusal.

Just as we pushed off from the sinking ship Alfred made an effort to break from me, but I held him firm, and he never repeated the attempt. He sat by me, with drooping head, still and silent, while the sailors rowed away from the vessel: still and silent when, with one accord, they paused at a little distance off, and we all waited and watched to see the brig sink: still and silent, even when that sinking happened, when the labouring hull plunged slowly into a hollow of the sea — hesitated, as it seemed, for one moment — rose a little again — then sank to rise no more.

Sank with her dead freight: sank, and snatched for ever from our power the corpse which we had discovered almost by a miracle — those jealously-preserved remains on the safe-keeping of which rested so strangely the hopes and the love-destinies of two living beings! As the last signs of the ship disap-

peared in the depths of the waters, I felt Monkton trembling all over as he sat close at my side, and heard him repeating to himself, sadly, and many times over, the name of "Ada."

I tried to turn his thoughts to another subject, but it was useless. He pointed over the sea to where the brig had once been, and where nothing was left to look at but the rolling waves.

"The empty place will now remain empty for ever in Wincot vault."

As he said those words, he fixed his eyes for a moment sadly and earnestly on my face, then looked away, leant his cheek upon his hand, and spoke no more.

We were sighted long before nightfall by a trading-vessel, were taken on board, and landed at Cartagena in Spain. Alfred never held up his head, and never once spoke to me of his own accord, the whole time we were at sea in the merchantman. I observed, however, with alarm, that he talked often and incoherently to himself — constantly muttering the lines of the old prophecy — constantly referring to the fatal place that was empty in Wincot vault — constantly repeating in broken accents, which it affected me inexpressibly to hear, the name of the poor girl who was awaiting his return to England. Nor were these the only causes for the apprehension that I now felt on his account. Towards the end of our voyage he began to

suffer from alternations of fever fits and shivering fits, which I ignorantly imagined to be attacks of ague. I was soon undeceived. We had hardly been a day on shore before he became so much worse that I secured the best medical assistance Cartagena could afford. For a day or two the doctors differed, as usual, about the nature of his complaint, but ere long alarming symptoms displayed themselves. The medical men declared that his life was in danger, and told me that his disease was brain fever.

Shocked and grieved as I was, I hardly knew how to act at first under the fresh responsibility now laid upon me. Ultimately I decided on writing to the old priest who had been Alfred's tutor, and who, as I knew, still resided at Wincot Abbey. I told this gentleman all that had happened, begged him to break my melancholy news as gently as possible to Miss Elmslie, and assured him of my resolution to remain with Monkton to the last.

After I had despatched my letter, and had sent to Gibraltar to secure the best English medical advice that could be obtained, I felt that I had done my best, and that nothing remained but to wait and hope.

Many a sad and anxious hour did I pass by my poor friend's bedside. Many a time did I doubt whether I had done right in giving any encouragement to his delusion. The reasons for doing so which had suggested themselves to me, after my first inter-

view with him, seemed, however, on reflection, to be valid reasons still. The only way of hastening his returning to England and to Miss Elmslie, who was pining for that return, was the way I had taken. It was not my fault that a disaster which no man could foresee had overthrown all his projects and all mine. But now that the calamity had happened and was irretrievable, how, in the event of his physical recovery, was his moral malady to be combated?

When I reflected on the hereditary taint in his mental organisation, on that first childish fright of Stephen Monkton from which he had never recovered, on the perilously secluded life that he had led at the Abbey, and on his firm persuasion of the reality of the apparition by which he believed himself to be constantly followed, I confess I despaired of shaking his superstitious faith in every word and line of the old family prophecy. If the series of striking coincidences which appeared to attest its truth had made a strong and lasting impression on *me* (and this was assuredly the case), how could I wonder that they had produced the effect of absolute conviction on *his* mind, constituted as it was? If I argued with him, and he answered me, how could I rejoin? If he said, "The prophecy points at the last of the family: *I* am the last of the family. The prophecy mentions an empty place in Wincot vault: there is such an empty place there at this moment. On the faith of the prophecy I told you that Stephen Monkton's body was unburied,

and you found that it was unburied," — if he said this, what use would it be for me to reply, "These are only strange coincidences, after all?"

The more I thought of the task that lay before me, if he recovered, the more I felt inclined to despond. The oftener the English physician who attended on him said to me, "He may get the better of the fever, but he has a fixed idea, which never leaves him night or day, which has unsettled his reason, and which will end in killing him, unless you or some of his friends can remove it," — the oftener I heard this, the more acutely I felt my own powerlessness, the more I shrank from every idea that was connected with the hopeless future.

I had only expected to receive my answer from Wincot in the shape of a letter. It was consequently a great surprise, as well as a great relief, to be informed one day that two gentlemen wished to speak with me, and to find that of these two gentlemen the first was the old priest, and the second a male relative of Mrs. Elmslie.

Just before their arrival the fever-symptoms had disappeared, and Alfred had been pronounced out of danger. Both the priest and his companion were eager to know when the sufferer would be strong enough to travel. They had come to Cartagena expressly to take him home with them, and felt far more hopeful than I did of the restorative effects of his native air. After

all the questions connected with the first important point of the journey to England had been asked and answered, I ventured to make some inquiries after Miss Elmslie. Her relative informed me that she was suffering both in body and in mind from excess of anxiety on Alfred's account. They had been obliged to deceive her as to the dangerous nature of his illness, in order to deter her from accompanying the priest and her relation on their mission to Spain.

Slowly and imperfectly as the weeks wore on, Alfred regained something of his former physical strength, but no alteration appeared in his illness as it affected his mind.

From the very first day of his advance towards recovery, it had been discovered that the brain fever had exercised the strangest influence over his faculties of memory. All recollection of recent events was gone from him. Everything connected with Naples, with me, with his journey to Italy, had dropped in some mysterious manner entirely out of his remembrance. So completely had all late circumstances passed from his memory that, though he recognised the old priest and his own servant easily on the first days of his convalescence, he never recognised me, but regarded me with such a wistful, doubting expression, that I felt inexpressibly pained when I approached his bedside. All his questions were about Miss Elmslie and Wincot Abbey; and all his talk referred to the period when his father was yet alive.

The doctors augured good rather than ill from this loss of memory of recent incidents, saying that it would turn out to be temporary, and that it answered the first great healing purpose of keeping his mind at ease. I tried to believe them — tried to feel as sanguine, when the day came for his departure, as the old friends felt who were taking him home. But the effort was too much for me. A foreboding that I should never see him again oppressed my heart, and the tears came into my eyes as I saw the worn figure of my poor friend half helped, half lifted into the travelling carriage, and borne away gently on the road towards home.

He had never recognised me, and the doctors had begged that I would give him, for some time to come, as few opportunities as possible of doing so. But for this request I should have accompanied him to England. As it was, nothing better remained for me to do than to change the scene, and recruit as I best could my energies of body and mind, depressed of late by much watching and anxiety. The famous cities of Spain were not new to me, but I visited them again, and revived old impressions of the Alhambra and Madrid. Once or twice I thought of making a pilgrimage to the East, but late events had sobered and altered me. That yearning, unsatisfied feeling which we call "home-sickness," began to prey upon my heart, and I resolved to return to England.

I went back by way of Paris, having settled with

the priest that he should write to me at my banker's there, as soon as he could after Alfred had returned to Wincot. If I had gone to the East, the letter would have been forwarded to me. I wrote to prevent this; and, on my arrival at Paris, stopped at the banker's before I went to my hotel.

The moment the letter was put into my hands, the black border on the envelope told me the worst. He was dead.

There was but one consolation — he had died calmly, almost happily, without once referring to those fatal chances which had wrought the fulfilment of the ancient prophecy. "My beloved pupil," the old priest wrote, "seemed to rally a little the first few days after his return, but he gained no real strength, and soon suffered a slight relapse of fever. After this he sank gradually and gently day by day, and so departed from us on the last dread journey. Miss Elmslie (who knows that I am writing this) desires me to express her deep and lasting gratitude for all your kindness to Alfred. She told me when we brought him back, that she had waited for him as his promised wife, and that she would nurse him now as a wife should; and she never left him. His face was turned towards her, his hand was clasped in hers when he died. It will console you to know that he never mentioned events at Naples, or the shipwreck that followed them, from the day of his return to the day of his death."

Three days after reading the letter I was at Wincot, and heard all the details of Alfred's last moments from the priest. I felt a shock which it would not be very easy for me to analyse or explain, when I heard that he had been buried, at his own desire, in the fatal Abbey vault.

The priest took me down to see the place — a grim, cold subterranean building, with a low roof, supported on heavy Saxon arches. Narrow niches, with the ends only of coffins visible within them, ran down each side of the vault. The nails and silver ornaments flashed here and there as my companion moved past them with a lamp in his hand. At the lower end of the place he stopped, pointed to a niche, and said: — "He lies there, between his father and mother." I looked a little further on, and saw what appeared at first like a long dark tunnel. "That is only an empty niche," said the priest, following me. "If the body of Mr. Stephen Monkton had been brought to Wincot, his coffin would have been placed there."

A chill came over me, and a sense of dread which I am ashamed of having felt now, but which I could not combat then. The blessed light of day was pouring down gaily at the other end of the vault through the open door. I turned my back on the empty niche, and hurried into the sunlight and the fresh air.

As I walked across the grass glade leading down to the vault, I heard the rustle of a woman's dress behind me, and, turning round, saw a young lady advancing, clad in deep mourning. Her sweet sad face, her manner as she held out her hand, told me who it was in an instant.

"I heard that you were here," she said, "and I wished" — her voice faltered a little. My heart ached as I saw how her lip trembled, but before I could say anything, she recovered herself, and went on — "I wished to take your hand, and thank you for your brotherly kindness to Alfred; and I wanted to tell you that I am sure, in all you did, you acted tenderly and considerately for the best. Perhaps you may be soon going away from home again, and we may not meet any more. I shall never, never forget that you were kind to him when he wanted a friend, and that you have the greatest claim of any one on earth to be gratefully remembered in my thoughts as long as I live."

The inexpressible tenderness of her voice, trembling a little all the while she spoke, the pale beauty of her face, the artless candour in her sad, quiet eyes, so affected me that I could not trust myself to answer her at first, except by gesture. Before I recovered my voice, she had given me her hand once more and had left me.

I never saw her again. The chances and changes

of life kept us apart. When I last heard of her, years and years ago, she was faithful to the memory of the dead, and was Ada Elmslie still for Alfred Monkton's sake.

END OF MAD MONKTON.

THE BLACK COTTAGE.



THE BLACK COTTAGE.

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother's death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service, and when I lived alone with my father, in the midst of a moor in the West of England.

The moor was covered with great limestone rocks, and intersected here and there by streamlets. The nearest habitation to ours was situated about a mile and a half off, where a strip of the fertile land stretched out into the waste, like a tongue. Here the out-buildings of the great Moor Farm, then in the possession of my husband's father, began. The Farmlands stretched down gently into a beautiful rich valley, lying nicely sheltered by the high platform of the moor. When the ground began to rise again, miles and miles away, it led up to a country-house, called Holme Manor, belonging to a gentleman named Knifton. Mr. Knifton had lately married a young lady whom my mother had nursed, and whose kindness and friendship for me, her foster-sister, I shall remember gratefully to the last day of my life. These, and other slight particulars, it is necessary to my story that I should tell you; and it is also necessary

that you should be especially careful to bear them well in mind.

My father was by trade a stone-mason. His cottage stood a mile and a half from the nearest habitation. In all other directions we were four or five times that distance from neighbours. Being very poor people, this lonely situation had one great attraction for us — we lived rent free on it. In addition to that advantage, the stones, by shaping which my father gained his livelihood, lay all about him at his very door; so that he thought his position, solitary as it was, quite an enviable one. I can hardly say that I agreed with him, though I never complained. I was very fond of my father, and managed to make the best of my loneliness with the thought of being useful to him. Mrs. Knifton wished to take me into her service when she married, but I declined, unwillingly enough, for my father's sake. If I had gone away, he would have had nobody to live with him; and my mother made me promise on her death-bed, that he should never be left to pine away alone in the midst of the bleak moor. Our cottage, small as it was, was stoutly and snugly built, with stone from the moor as a matter of course. The walls were lined inside and fenced outside with wood, the gift of Mr. Knifton's father to my father. This double covering of cracks and crevices, which would have been superfluous in a sheltered position, was absolutely necessary, in our exposed situation, to keep out the cold winds which, excepting just the summer months, swept over us con-

tinually, all the year round. The outside boards, covering our roughly-built stone walls, my father protected against the wet with pitch and tar. This gave to our little abode a curiously dark, dingy look, especially when it was seen from a distance; and so it had come to be called in the neighbourhood, even before I was born, the Black Cottage.

I have now related the preliminary particulars which it is desirable that you should know, and may proceed at once to the pleasanter task of telling you my story.

One cloudy autumn day, when I was rather more than eighteen years old, a herdsman walked over from Moor Farm with a letter which had been left there for my father. It came from a builder, living at our county town, half a day's journey off, and it invited my father to come to him and give his judgment about an estimate for some stone-work on a very large scale. My father's expenses for loss of time were to be paid, and he was to have his share of employment afterward, in preparing the stone. He was only too glad, therefore, to obey the directions which the letter contained, and to prepare at once for his long walk to the county town.

Considering the time at which he received the letter, and the necessity of resting before he attempted to return, it was impossible for him to avoid being away from home for one night at least. He proposed to me, in case I disliked being left alone in the Black Cottage, to lock the door and to take me to Moor

• Farm to sleep with any one of the milkmaids who would give me a share of her bed. I by no means liked the notion of sleeping with a girl whom I did not know, and I saw no reason to feel afraid of being left alone for only one night; so I declined. No thieves had ever come near us; our poverty was sufficient protection against them; and of other dangers there were none that even the most timid person could apprehend. Accordingly, I got my father's dinner, laughing at the notion of my taking refuge under the protection of a milkmaid at Moor Farm. He started for his walk as soon as he had done, saying he should try and be back by dinner-time the next day, and leaving me and my cat Polly to take care of the house.

I had cleared the table and brightened up the fire, and had sat down to my work, with the cat dozing at my feet, when I heard the trampling of horses; and, running to the door, saw Mr. and Mrs. Knifton, with their groom behind them, riding up to the Black Cottage. It was part of the young lady's kindness never to neglect an opportunity of coming to pay me a friendly visit; and her husband was generally willing to accompany her for his wife's sake. I made my best curtsy, therefore, with a great deal of pleasure, but with no particular surprise at seeing them. They dismounted and entered the cottage, laughing and talking in great spirits. I soon heard that they were riding to the same county town for which my father was bound; and that they intended to stay with some

friends there for a few days, and to return home on horseback, as they went out.

I heard this, and I also discovered that they had been having an argument, in jest, about money matters, as they rode along to our cottage. Mrs. Knifton had accused her husband of inveterate extravagance, and of never being able to go out with money in his pocket without spending it all, if he possibly could, before he got home again. Mr. Knifton had laughingly defended himself by declaring that all his pocket-money went in presents for his wife, and that, if he spent it lavishly, it was under her sole influence and superintendence.

"We are going to Cliverton now," he said to Mrs. Knifton, naming the county town, and warming himself at our poor fire just as pleasantly as if he had been standing on his own grand hearth. "You will stop to admire every pretty thing in every one of the Cliverton shop-windows; I shall hand you the purse, and you will go in and buy. When we have reached home again, and you have had time to get tired of your purchases, you will clasp your hands in amazement and declare that you are quite shocked at my habits of inveterate extravagance. I am only the banker who keeps the money — you, my love, are the spendthrift who throws it all away!"

"Am I, sir?" said Mrs. Knifton, with a look of mock indignation. "We will see if I am to be misrepresented in this way with impunity. Bessie, my dear," (turning to me), "you shall judge how far I deserve

the character which that unscrupulous man has just given to me. *I* am the spendthrift, am I? And you are only the banker? Very well. Banker! give me my money at once, if you please."

Mr. Knifton laughed, and took some gold and silver from his waistcoat pocket.

"No, no," said Mrs. Knifton. "You may want what you have got there for necessary expenses. Is that all the money you have about you? What do I feel here?" and she tapped her husband on the chest, just over the breast-pocket of his coat.

Mr. Knifton laughed again, and produced his pocket-book. His wife snatched it out of his hand, opened it, and drew out some bank-notes, put them back again immediately, and closing the pocket-book, stepped across the room to my poor mother's little walnut-wood book-case — the only bit of valuable furniture we had in the house.

"What are you going to do there?" asked Mr. Knifton, following his wife.

Mrs. Knifton opened the glass door of the book-case, put the pocket-book in a vacant place on one of the lower shelves, closed and locked the door again, and gave me the key.

"You called me a spendthrift just now," she said. "There is my answer. Not one farthing of that money shall you spend at Cliverton on *me*. Keep the key in your pocket, Bessie, and, whatever Mr. Knifton may say, on no account let him have it until we call again our way back. No, Sir, I won't trust you with

that money in your pocket in the town of Cliverton. I will make sure of your taking it all home again, by leaving it here in more trustworthy hands than yours, until we ride back. Bessie, my dear, what do you say to that, as a lesson in economy inflicted on a prudent husband by a spendthrift wife?"

She took Mr. Knifton's arm while she spoke, and drew him away to the door. He protested, and made some resistance, but she easily carried her point, for he was far too fond of her to have a will of his own in any trifling matter between them. Whatever the men might say, Mr. Knifton was a model husband in the estimation of all the women who knew him.

"You will see us as we come back, Bessie. Till then, you are our banker, and the pocket-book is yours," cried Mrs. Knifton, gaily, at the door. Her husband lifted her into the saddle, mounted himself, and away they both galloped over the moor, as wild and happy as a couple of children.

Although my being trusted with money by Mrs. Knifton was no novelty (in her maiden days she always employed me to pay her dress-maker's bills), I did not feel quite easy at having a pocket-book full of bank notes left by her in my charge. I had no positive apprehensions about the safety of the deposit placed in my hands; but it was one of the odd points in my character then (and I think it is still), to feel an unreasonably strong objection to charging myself with money responsibilities of any kind, even to suit the convenience of my dearest friends. As soon as I was

left alone, the very sight of the pocket-book behind the glass-door of the book-case began to worry me; and instead of returning to my work, I puzzled my brains about finding a place to lock it up in, where it would not be exposed to the view of any chance passers-by, who might stray into the Black Cottage.

This was not an easy matter to compass in a poor house like ours, where we had nothing valuable to put under lock and key. After running over various hiding-places in my mind, I thought of my tea-caddy, a present from Mrs. Knifton, which I always kept out of harm's way in my own bedroom. Most unluckily — as it afterwards turned out — instead of taking the pocket book to the tea-caddy, I went into my room first to take the tea-caddy to the pocket-book. I only acted in this roundabout way from sheer thoughtlessness, and severely enough I was punished for it, as you will acknowledge yourself when you have read a page or two more of my story.

I was just getting the unlucky tea-caddy out of my cupboard, when I heard footsteps in the passage, and running out immediately, saw two men walk into the kitchen — the room in which I had received Mr. and Mrs. Knifton. I inquired what they wanted, sharply enough, and one of them answered immediately that they wanted my father. He turned towards me, of course, as he spoke, and I recognised him as a stonemason, going among his comrades by the name of Shifty Dick. He bore a very bad character for everything but wrestling — a sport for which the working

men of our parts were famous all through the county. Shifty Dick was champion, and he had got his name from some tricks in wrestling, for which he was celebrated. He was a tall, heavy man, with a lowering, scarred face, and huge hairy hands — the last visitor in the whole world that I should have been glad to see under any circumstances. His companion was a stranger, whom he addressed by the name of Jerry — a quick, dapper, wicked-looking man, who took off his cap to me with mock politeness, and showed, in so doing, a very bald head with some very ugly-looking knobs on it. I distrusted him worse than I did Shifty Dick, and managed to get between his leering eyes and the bookcase, as I told the two that my father was gone out, and that I did not expect him back till the next day.

The words were hardly out of my mouth before I repented that my anxiety to get rid of my unwelcome visitors had made me incautious enough to acknowledge that my father would be away from home for the whole night.

Shifty Dick and his companion looked at each other when I unwisely let out the truth, but made no remark, except to ask me if I would give them a drop of cider. I answered, sharply, that I had no cider in the house — having no fear of the consequences of refusing them drink, because I knew that plenty of men were at work within hail, in a neighbouring quarry. The two looked at each other again, when I denied having any cider to give them; and Jerry (as

I am obliged to call him, knowing no other name by which to distinguish the fellow) took off his cap to me once more, and, with a kind of blackguard gentility upon him, said they would have the pleasure of calling the next day, when my father was at home. I said good afternoon as ungraciously as possible; and, to my great relief, they both left the cottage immediately afterwards.

As soon as they were well away, I watched them from the door. They trudged off in the direction of Moor Farm; and, as it was beginning to get dusk, I soon lost sight of them.

Half an hour afterwards I looked out again.

The wind had lulled with the sunset, but the mist was rising, and a heavy rain was beginning to fall. Never did the lonely prospect of the moor look so dreary as it looked to my eyes that evening. Never did I regret any slight thing more sincerely than I then regretted the leaving of Mr. Knifton's pocket-book in my charge. I cannot say that I suffered under any actual alarm, for I felt next to certain that neither Shifty Dick nor Jerry had got a chance of setting eyes on so small a thing as the pocket-book, while they were in the kitchen; but there was a kind of vague distrust troubling me — a suspicion of the night — a dislike at being left by myself, which I never remember having experienced before. This feeling so increased, after I had closed the door and gone back to the kitchen, that, when I heard the voices of the quarrymen, as they passed our cottage on their way

home to the village in the valley below Moor Farm, I stepped out into the passage with a momentary notion of telling them how I was situated, and asking them for advice and protection.

I had hardly formed this idea, however, before I dismissed it. None of the quarrymen were intimate friends of mine. I had a nodding acquaintance with them, and believed them to be honest men, as times went. But my own common sense told me that what little knowledge of their characters I had, was by no means sufficient to warrant me in admitting them into my confidence in the matter of the pocket-book. I had seen enough of poverty and poor men to know what a terrible temptation a large sum of money is to those whose whole lives are passed in scraping up sixpences by weary hard work. It is one thing to write fine sentiments in books about incorruptible honesty, and another thing to put those sentiments in practice, when one day's work is all that a man has to set up in the way of an obstacle between starvation and his own fireside.

The only resource that remained was to carry the pocket-book with me to Moor Farm, and ask permission to pass the night there. But I could not persuade myself that there was any real necessity for taking such a course as this; and, if the truth must be told, my pride revolted at the idea of presenting myself in the character of a coward before the people at the farm. Timidity is thought rather a graceful attraction among ladies, but among poor women it is something

to be laughed at. A woman with less spirit of her own than I had, and always shall have, would have considered twice in my situation before she made up her mind to encounter the jokes of ploughmen and the jeers of milkmaids. As for me, I hardly considered about going to the farm before I despised myself for entertaining any such notion. "No, no," thought I, "I am not the woman to walk a mile and a half through rain, and mist, and darkness, to tell a whole kitchenful of people that I am afraid. Come what may, here I stop till father gets back."

Having arrived at that valiant resolution, the first thing I did was to lock and bolt the back and front doors, and see to the security of every shutter in the house.

That duty performed, I made a blazing fire, lighted my candle, and sat down to tea, as snug and comfortable as possible. I could hardly believe now, with the light in the room, and the sense of security inspired by the closed doors and shutters, that I had ever felt even the slightest apprehension earlier in the day. I sang as I washed up the tea-things; and even the cat seemed to catch the infection of my good spirits. I never knew the pretty creature so playful as she was that evening.

The tea-things put by, I took up my knitting, and worked away at it so long that I began at last to get drowsy. The fire was so bright and comforting that I could not muster resolution enough to leave it and go to bed. I sat staring lazily into the blaze, with my

knitting on my lap — sat till the splashing of the rain outside, and the fitful, sullen sobbing of the wind, grew fainter and fainter on my ear. The last sounds I heard before I fairly dozed off to sleep were the cheerful crackling of the fire and the steady purring of the cat, as she basked luxuriously in the warm light on the hearth. Those were the last sounds before I fell asleep. The sound that woke me was one loud bang at the front door.

I started up, with my heart (as the saying is) in my mouth, with a frightful momentary shuddering at the roots of my hair — I started up breathless, cold, and motionless; waiting in the silence, I hardly knew for what; doubtful, at first, whether I had dreamed about the bang at the door, or whether the blow had really been struck on it.

In a minute, or less, there came a second bang, louder than the first. I ran out into the passage.

“Who’s there?”

“Let us in,” answered a voice, which I recognized immediately as the voice of Shifty Dick.

“Wait a bit, my dear, and let me explain,” said a second voice, in the low, oily, jeering tones of Dick’s companion — the wickedly clever little man whom he called Jerry. “You are alone in the house, my pretty little dear. You may crack your sweet voice with screeching, and there’s nobody near to hear you. Listen to reason, my love, and let us in. We don’t want cider this time — we only want a very neat-looking

pocket-book which you happen to have, and your late excellent mother's four silver tea spoons, which you keep so nice and clean on the chimney-piece. If you let us in, we won't hurt a hair of your head, my cherub, and we promise to go away the moment we have got what we want, unless you particularly wish us to stop to tea. If you keep us out, we shall be obliged to break into the house, and then —"

"And then," burst in Shifty Dick, "we'll *mash* you!"

"Yes," said Jerry, "we'll mash you, my beauty. But you won't drive us to doing that, will you? You will let us in?"

This long parley gave me time to recover from the effect which the first bang at the door had produced on my nerves. The threats of the two villains would have terrified some women out of their senses; but the only result they produced on *me* was violent indignation. I had, thank God, a strong spirit of my own; and the cool, contemptuous insolence of the man Jerry effectually roused it.

"You cowardly villians!" I screamed at them through the door. "You think you can frighten me because I am only a poor girl left alone in the house. You ragamuffin thieves, I defy you both! Our bolts are strong, our shutters are thick. I am here to keep my father's house safe; and keep it I will against an army of you!"

You may imagine what a passion I was in when I vapoured and blustered in that way. I heard Jerry

laugh, and Shifty Dick swear a whole mouthful of oaths. Then there was a dead silence for a minute or two; and then the two ruffians attacked the door.

I rushed into the kitchen and seized the poker, and then heaped wood on the fire, and lighted all the candles I could find; for I felt as though I could keep up my courage better if I had plenty of light. Strange and improbable as it may appear, the next thing that attracted my attention was my poor pussy, crouched up, panic-stricken, in a corner. I was so fond of the little creature that I took her up in my arms and carried her into my bedroom, and put her inside my bed. A comical thing to do in a situation of deadly peril, was it not? But it seemed quite natural and proper at the time.

All this while the blows were falling faster and faster on the door. They were dealt, as I conjectured, with heavy stones picked up from the ground outside. Jerry sang at his wicked work, and Shifty Dick swore. As I left the bedroom, after putting the cat under cover, I heard the lower panel of the door begin to crack.

I ran into the kitchen and huddled our four silver spoons into my pocket; then took the unlucky book with the banknotes and put it in the bosom of my dress. I was determined to defend the property confided to my care with my life. Just as I had secured the pocket-book I heard the door splintering, and

rushed into the passage again with my heavy kitchen poker lifted in both hands.

I was in time to see the bald head of Jerry, with the ugly-looking knobs on it, pushed into the passage through a great rent in one of the lower panels of the door.

"Get out, you villian, or I'll brain you on the spot!" I screeched, threatening him with the poker.

Mr. Jerry took his head out again much faster than he put it in.

The next thing that came through the rent was a long pitchfork, which they darted at me from the outside, to move me from the door. I struck at it with all my might, and the blow must have jarred the hand of Shifty Dick up to his very shoulder, for I heard him give a roar of rage and pain. Before he could catch at the fork with his other hand, I had drawn it inside. By this time, even Jerry lost his temper, and swore more awfully than Dick himself.

Then there came another minute of respite. I suspected they had gone to get bigger stones, and I dreaded the giving way of the whole door.

Running into the bedroom as this fear beset me, I laid hold of my chest of drawers, dragged it into the passage, and threw it down against the door. On the top of that I heaped my father's big tool chest, three chairs, and a scuttleful of coals — and last, I dragged out the kitchen-table and rammed it as hard as I could against the whole barricade. They heard me as they were coming up to the door with fresh stones. Jerry

said, "Stop a bit," and then the two consulted together in whispers. I listened eagerly, and just caught these words:

"Let's try it the other way."

Nothing more was said, but I heard their footsteps retreating from the door.

Were they going to besiege the back-door now?

I had hardly asked myself that question when I heard their voices at the other side of the house. The back-door was smaller than the front; but it had this advantage in the way of strength — it was made of two solid oak boards, joined longwise, and strengthened inside by heavy cross pieces. It had no bolts like the front door, but was fastened by a bar of iron, running across it in a slanting direction, and fitting at either end into the wall.

"They must have the whole cottage down before they can break in at that door," I thought to myself. And they soon found out as much for themselves. After five minutes of banging at the back door, they gave up any farther attack in that direction, and cast their heavy stones down with curses of fury awful to hear.

I went into the kitchen and dropped on the window-seat to rest for a moment. Suspense and excitement together were beginning to tell upon me. The perspiration broke out thick on my forehead, and I began to feel the bruises I had inflicted on my hands in making the barricade against the front door. I had not lost a particle of my resolution, but I was beginning to lose

strength. There was a bottle of rum in the cupboard, which my brother the sailor had left with us the last time he was ashore. I drank a drop of it. Never before or since have I put anything down my throat that did me half so much good as that precious mouthful of rum.

I was still sitting in the window seat drying my face, when I suddenly heard their voices close behind me.

They were feeling the outside of the window against which I was sitting. It was protected, like all the other windows in the cottage, by iron bars. I listened in dreadful suspense for the sound of filing, but nothing of the sort was audible. They had evidently reckoned on frightening me easily into letting them in, and had come unprovided with house-breaking tools of any kind. A fresh burst of oaths informed me that they had recognized the obstacle of the iron bars. I listened breathlessly for some warning of what they were going to do next, but their voices seemed to die away in the distance. They were retreating from the window. Were they also retreating from the house altogether? Had they given up the idea of effecting an entrance in despair?

A long silence followed — a silence which tried my courage even more severely than the tumult of their first attack on the cottage.

Dreadful suspicions now beset me of their being able to accomplish by treachery what they had failed to effect by force. Well as I knew the cottage, I be-

gan to doubt whether there might not be ways of cunningly and silently entering it against which I was not provided. The ticking of the clock annoyed me; the crackling of the fire startled me. I looked out twenty times in a minute into the dark corners of the passage, straining my eyes, holding my breath, anticipating the most unlikely events, the most impossible dangers. Had they really gone? or were they still prowling about the house? Oh, what a sum of money I would have given, only to have known what they were about in that interval of silence!

I was startled at last out of my suspense in the most awful manner. A shout from one of them reached my ears on a sudden down the kitchen chimney. It was so unexpected and so horrible in the stillness, that I screamed for the first time since the attack on the house. My worst forebodings had never suggested to me that the two villains might mount upon the roof.

"Let us in, you she devil!" roared a voice down the chimney.

There was another pause. The smoke from the wood fire, thin and light as it was in the red state of the embers at that moment, had evidently obliged the man to take his face from the mouth of the chimney. I counted the seconds while he was, as I conjectured, getting his breath again. In less than half a minute there came another shout:

"Let us in, or we'll burn the place down over your head."

Burn it? Burn what? There was nothing easily

combustible but the thatch on the roof; and that had been well soaked by the heavy rain which had now fallen incessantly for more than six hours. Burn the place over my head? How?

While I was still casting about wildly in my mind to discover what possible danger there could be of fire, one of the heavy stones placed on the thatch to keep it from being torn up by high winds, came thundering down the chimney. It scattered the live embers on the hearth all over the room. A richly furnished place, with knickknacks and fine muslin about it, would have been set on fire immediately. Even our bare floor and rough furniture gave out a smell of burning at the first shower of embers which the first stone scattered.

For an instant I stood quite horror-struck before this new proof of the devilish ingenuity of the villains outside. But the dreadful danger I was now in recalled me to my senses immediately. There was a large canful of water in my bedroom, and I ran in at once to fetch it. Before I could get back to the kitchen, a second stone had been thrown down the chimney, and the floor was smouldering in several places.

I had wit enough to let the smouldering go on for a moment or two more, and to pour the whole of my canful of water over the fire before the third stone came down the chimney. The live embers on the floor I easily disposed of after that. The man on the roof must have heard the hissing of the fire as I put it out, and have felt the change produced in the air at the mouth of the chimney; for after the third stone had

descended, no more followed it. As for either of the ruffians themselves dropping down by the same road along which the stones had come, that was not to be dreaded. The chimney, as I well knew by our experience in cleaning it, was too narrow to give passage to anyone above the size of a small boy.

I looked upwards as that comforting reflection crossed my mind — I looked up, and saw, as plainly as I see the paper I am now writing on, the point of a knife coming through the inside of the roof just over my head. Our cottage had no upper story, and our rooms had no ceilings. Slowly and wickedly the knife wriggled its way through the dry inside thatch between the rafters. It stopped for a while, and there came a sound of tearing. That, in its turn, stopped too; there was a great fall of dry thatch on the floor; and I saw the heavy, hairy hand of Shifted Dick, armed with the knife, come through after the fallen fragments. He tapped at the rafters with the back of the knife, as if to test their strength. Thank God, they were substantial and close together! Nothing lighter than a hatchet would have sufficed to remove any part of them.

The murderous hand was still tapping with the knife, when I heard a shout from the man Jerry, coming from the neighbourhood of my father's stone-shed in the back yard. The hand and knife disappeared instantly. I went to the back door and put my ear to it, and listened.

Both men were now in the shed. I made the

most desperate efforts to call to mind what tools and other things were left in it, which might be used against me. But my agitation confused me. I could remember nothing except my father's big stone saw, which was far too heavy and unwieldy to be used on the roof of the cottage. I was still puzzling my brains and making my head swim to no purpose, when I heard the men dragging something out of the shed. At the same instant when the noise caught my ear, the remembrance flashed across me like lightning of some beams of wood which had lain in the shed for years past. I had hardly time to feel certain that they were removing one of these beams, before I heard Shifty Dick say to Jerry: —

“Which door?”

“The front,” was the answer. “We’ve cracked it already; we’ll have it down now in no time.”

Senses less sharpened by danger than mine would have understood but too easily, from these words, that they were about to use the beam as a battering-ram against the door.” When that conviction overcame me, I lost courage at last. I felt that the door must come down. No such barricade as I had constructed could support it, for more than a few minutes, against such shocks as it was now to receive.

“I can do no more to keep the house against them,” I said to myself, with my knees knocking together, and the tears at last beginning to wet my cheeks. “I must trust to the night and the thick

darkness, and save my life by running for it while there is yet time."

I huddled on my cloak and hood, and had my hand on the bar of the back-door, when a piteous mew from the bed-room reminded me of the existence of poor Pussy. I ran in, and huddled the creature up in my apron. Before I was out in the passage again, the first shock from the beam fell on the door.

The upper hinge gave way. The chairs and the coal-scuttle forming the top of my barricade were hurled, rattling, on to the floor; but the lower hinge of the door, and the chest of drawers and tool-chest, still kept their places.

"One more," I heard the villains cry — "one more run with the beam, and down it comes!"

Just as they must have been starting for that "one more run," I opened the back door and fled out into the night, with the book full of bank-notes in my bosom, the silver spoons in my pocket, and the cat in my arms. I threaded my way easily enough through the familiar obstacles in the back-yard, and was out in the pitch darkness of the moor, before I heard the second shock, and the crash which told me that the whole door had given way.

In a few minutes they must have discovered the fact of my flight with the pocket-book, for I heard shouts in the distance as if they were running out to pursue me. I kept on at the top of my speed, and the noise soon died away. It was so dark that twenty

thieves, instead of two, would have found it useless to follow me.

How long it was before I reached the farm-house — the nearest place to which I could fly for refuge — I cannot tell you. I remember that I had just sense enough to keep the wind at my back (having observed in the beginning of the evening that it blew toward Moor Farm), and to go on resolutely through the darkness. In all other respects, I was by this time half-crazed by what I had gone through. If it had so happened that the wind had changed after I had observed its direction early in the evening, I should have gone astray, and have probably perished of fatigue and exposure on the moor. Providentially, it still blew steadily as it had blown for hours past, and I reached the farm-house with my clothes wet through, and my brain in a high fever. When I made my alarm at the door, they had all gone to bed but the farmer's eldest son, who was sitting up late over his pipe and newspaper. I just mustered strength enough to gasp out a few words, telling him what was the matter, and then fell down at his feet, for the first time in my life, in a dead swoon.

That swoon was followed by a severe illness. When I got strong enough to look about me again, I found myself in one of the farm-house beds — my father, Mrs. Knifton, and the doctor, were all in the room — my cat was asleep at my feet, and the pocket-book that I had saved lay on the table by my side.

There was plenty of news for me to hear, as soon

as I was fit to listen to it. Shifty Dick and the other rascal had been caught, and were in prison, waiting their trial at the next assizes. Mr. and Mrs. Knifton had been so shocked at the danger I had run — for which they blamed their own want of thoughtfulness in leaving the pocket-book in my care — that they had insisted on my father's removing from our lonely home to a cottage on their land, which we were to inhabit rent free. The bank-notes that I had saved were given to me to buy furniture with, in place of the things that the thieves had broken. These pleasant tidings assisted so greatly in promoting my recovery, that I was soon able to relate to my friends at the farm house the particulars that I have written here. They were all surprised and interested; but no one, as I thought, listened to me with such breathless attention as the farmer's eldest son. Mrs. Knifton noticed this, too, and began to make jokes about it, in her light-hearted way, as soon as we were alone. I thought little of her jesting at the time; but when I got well, and we went to live at our new home, "the young farmer," as he was called in our parts, constantly came to see us, and constantly managed to meet me out of doors. I had my share of vanity, like other young women, and I began to think of Mrs. Knifton's jokes with some attention. To be brief, the young farmer managed one Sunday — I never could tell how — to lose his way with me in returning from Church, and before we found out the right road home again, he had asked me to be his wife.

His relations did all they could to keep us asunder

and break off the match, thinking a poor stone-mason's daughter no fit wife for a prosperous yeoman. But the farmer was too obstinate for them. He had one form of answer to all their objections. "A man, if he is worth the name, marries according to his own notions, and to please himself," he used to say. "My notion is, that when I take a wife I am placing my character and my happiness — the most precious things I have to trust — in one woman's care. The woman I mean to marry had a small charge confided to her care, and showed herself worthy of it at the risk of her life. That is proof enough for me that she is worthy of the greatest charge I can put into her hands. Rank and riches are fine things, but the certainty of getting a good wife is something better still. I'm of age, I know my own mind, and I mean to marry the stonemason's daughter."

And he did marry me. Whether I proved myself worthy or not of his good opinion is a question which I must leave you to ask my husband. All that I had to relate about myself and my doings is now told. Whatever interest my perilous adventure may excite, ends, I am well aware, with my escape to the farmhouse. I have only ventured on writing these few additional sentences, because my marriage is the moral of my story. It has brought me the choicest blessings of happiness and prosperity; and I owe them all to my night-adventure in *The Black Cottage*.

END OF THE BLACK COTTAGE.

THE FAMILY SECRET.

THE FAMILY SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

WAS it an Englishman or a Frenchman who first remarked that every family had a skeleton in its cupboard? I am not learned enough to know; but I reverence the observation, whoever made it. It speaks a startling truth through an appropriately grim metaphor — a truth which I have discovered by practical experience. Our family had a skeleton in the cupboard; and the name of it was Uncle George.

I arrived at the knowledge that this skeleton existed, and I traced it to the particular cupboard in which it was hidden, by slow degrees. I was a child when I first began to suspect that there was such a thing, and a grown man when I at last discovered that my suspicions were true.

My father was a doctor, having an excellent practice in a large country-town. I have heard that he married against the wishes of his family. They could not object to my mother on the score of birth, breeding, or character — they only disliked her heartily. My grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and aunts, all declared that she was a heartless, deceitful woman; all disliked her manners, her opinions, and even the expression of her

face — all, with the one exception of my father's youngest brother, George.

George was the unlucky member of our family. The rest were all clever; he was slow in capacity. The rest were all remarkably handsome; he was the sort of man that no woman ever looks at twice. The rest succeeded in life; he failed. His profession was the same as my father's; but he never got on when he started in practice for himself. The sick poor, who could not choose, employed him, and liked him. The sick rich, who could — especially the ladies — declined to call him in when they could get anybody else. In experience he gained greatly by his profession; in money and reputation he gained nothing.

There are very few of us, however dull and unattractive we may be to outward appearance, who have not some strong passion, some germ of what is called romance, hidden more or less deeply in our natures. All the passion and romance in the nature of my Uncle George lay in his love and admiration for my father.

He sincerely worshipped his eldest brother, as one of the noblest of human beings. When my father was engaged to be married, and when the rest of the family, as I have already mentioned, did not hesitate to express their unfavourable opinion of the disposition of his chosen wife, Uncle George, who had never ventured on differing with any one before, to the amazement of every body undertook the defence of his future sister-in-law in the most vehement and positive manner. In

his estimation, his brother's choice was something sacred and indisputable. The lady might, and did, treat him with unconcealed contempt, laugh at his awkwardness, grow impatient at his stammering — it made no difference to Uncle George. She was to be his brother's wife; and, in virtue of that one great fact, she became, in the estimation of the poor surgeon, a very queen, who, by the laws of the domestic constitution, could do no wrong.

When my father had been married a little while, he took his youngest brother to live with him as his assistant.

If Uncle George had been made President of the College of Surgeons, he could not have been prouder and happier than he was in his new position. I am afraid my father never understood the depth of his brother's affection for him. All the hard work fell to George's share: the long journeys at night, the physicking of wearisome poor people, the drunken cases, the revolting cases — all the drudging, dirty business of the surgery, in short, was turned over to him; and day after day, month after month, he struggled through it without a murmur. When his brother and his sister-in-law went out to dine with the county gentry, it never entered his head to feel disappointed at being left unnoticed at home. When the return dinners were given, and he was asked to come in at teatime, and left to sit unregarded in a corner, it never occurred to him to imagine that he was treated with any want of consideration or respect. He was part of the furniture

of the house, and it was the business as well as the pleasure of his life, to turn himself to any use to which his brother might please to put him.

So much for what I have heard from others on the subject of my Uncle George. My own personal experience of him is limited to what I remember as a mere child. Let me say something, however, first about my parents, my sister, and myself.

My sister was the eldest born and the best loved. I did not come into the world till four years after her birth; and no other child followed me. Caroline, from her earliest days, was the perfection of beauty and health. I was small, weakly, and, if the truth must be told, almost as plain-featured as Uncle George himself. It would be ungracious and undutiful in me to presume to decide whether there was any foundation or not for the dislike that my father's family always felt for my mother. All I can venture to say is, that her children never had any cause to complain of her.

Her passionate affection for my sister, her pride in the child's beauty, I remember well; as also her uniform kindness and indulgence towards me. My personal defects must have been a sore trial to her in secret, but neither she nor my father ever showed me that they perceived any difference between Caroline and myself. When presents were made to my sister, presents were made to me. When my father and mother caught my sister up in their arms and kissed her, they scrupulously gave me my turn afterwards. My childish instinct told me that there was a difference in their

smiles when they looked at me and looked at her; that the kisses given to Caroline were warmer than the kisses given to me; that the hands which dried her tears, in our childish griefs, touched her more gently than the hands which dried mine. But these, and other small signs of preference like them, were such as no parents could be expected to control. I noticed them at the time rather with wonder than with repining. I recall them now without a harsh thought either towards my father or my mother. Both loved me, and both did their duty by me. If I seem to speak constrainedly of them here, it is not on my own account. I can honestly say that with all my heart and soul.

Even Uncle George, fond as he was of me, was fonder of my beautiful child-sister.

When I used mischievously to pull at his lank scanty hair, he would gently and laughingly take it out of my hands; but he would let Caroline tug at it till his dim, wandering, grey eyes winked and watered again with pain. He used to plunge perilously about the garden, in awkward imitation of the cantering of a horse, while I sat on his shoulders; but he would never proceed at any pace beyond a slow and safe walk when Caroline had a ride in her turn. When he took us out walking, Caroline was always on the side next the wall. When we interrupted him over his dirty work in the surgery, he used to tell me to go and play until he was ready for me; but he would put down his bottles, and clean his clumsy fingers on his coarse apron, and lead Caroline out again, as if

she had been the greatest lady in the land. Ah, how he loved her! — and, let me be honest and grateful, and add, how he loved me too!

When I was eight years old and Caroline was twelve, I was separated from home for some time. I had been ailing for many months previously; had got benefit from being taken to the seaside; and had shown symptoms of relapsing on being brought home again to the midland county in which we resided. After much consultation it was at last resolved that I should be sent to live, until my constitution got stronger, with a maiden-sister of my mother's, who had a house at a watering-place on the south coast.

I left home, I remember, loaded with presents, rejoicing over the prospect of looking at the sea again, as careless of the future and as happy in the present as any boy could be. Uncle George petitioned for a holiday to take me to the sea-side, but he could not be spared from the surgery. He consoled himself and me by promising to make me a magnificent model of a ship.

I have that model before my eyes now while I write. It is dusty with age; the paint on it is cracked, the ropes are tangled, the sails are moth-eaten and yellow. The hull is all out of proportion, and the rig has been smiled at by every nautical friend of mine who has ever looked at it. Yet, worn out and faulty as it is — inferior to the cheapest miniature vessel now-a-days in any toy-shop window — I hardly know

a possession of mine in this world, that I would not sooner part with than Uncle George's ship.

My life at the sea-side was a very happy one. I remained with my aunt more than a year. My mother often came to see how I was going on, and, at first, always brought my sister with her. But, during the last eight months of my stay, Caroline never once appeared. I noticed also at the same period a change in my mother's manner. She looked paler and more anxious at each succeeding visit, and always had long conferences in private with my aunt. At last she ceased to come and see us altogether, and only wrote to know how my health was getting on. My father, too, who had at the earlier periods of my absence from home, travelled to the seaside to watch the progress of my recovery as often as his professional engagements would permit, now kept away like my mother. Even Uncle George, who had never been allowed a holiday to come and see me, but who had hitherto often written and begged me to write to him, broke off our correspondence.

I was naturally perplexed and amazed by these changes, and persecuted my aunt to tell me the reason of them. At first she tried to put me off with excuses; then she admitted that there was trouble in our house; and finally she confessed that the trouble was caused by the illness of my sister. When I inquired what that illness was, my aunt said it was useless to attempt to explain it to me. I next applied to the servants. One of them was less cautious than my aunt, and

answered my question, but in terms that I could not comprehend. After much explanation, I was made to understand that "something was growing on my sister's neck that would spoil her beauty for ever, and perhaps kill her, if it could not be got rid of." How well I remember the shudder of horror that ran through me at the vague idea of this deadly "something!" A fearful, awe-struck curiosity to see what Caroline's illness was with my own eyes, troubled my inmost heart; and I begged to be allowed to go home and help to nurse her. The request was, it is almost needless to say, refused.

Weeks passed away, and still I heard nothing, except that my sister continued to be ill.

One day I privately wrote a letter to Uncle George, asking him in my childish way to come and tell me about Caroline's illness.

I knew where the post-office was, and slipped out in the morning unobserved and dropped my letter in the box. I stole home again by the garden, and climbed in at the window of a back parlour on the ground floor. The room above was my aunt's bed-chamber, and the moment I was inside the house, I heard moans and loud convulsive sobs proceeding from it. My aunt was a singularly quiet composed woman. I could not imagine that the loud sobbing and moaning came from her; and I ran down terrified into the kitchen to ask the servants who was crying so violently in my aunt's room.

I found the housemaid and the cook talking to-

gether in whispers, with serious faces. They started when they saw me, as if I had been a grown-up master who had caught them neglecting their work.

"He's too young to feel it much," I heard one say to the other. "So far as he is concerned, it seems like a mercy that it happened no later."

In a few minutes they had told me the worst. It was my aunt who had been crying in the bed-room. Caroline was dead.

I felt the blow more severely than the servants or anyone else about me supposed. Still I was a child in years, and I had the blessed elasticity of a child's nature. If I had been older, I might have been too much absorbed in grief to observe my aunt so closely as I did, when she was composed enough to see me, later in the day.

I was not surprised by the swollen state of her eyes, the paleness of her cheeks, or the fresh burst of tears that came from her when she took me in her arms at meeting. But I was both amazed and perplexed by the look of terror that I detected in her face. It was natural enough that she should grieve and weep over my sister's death; but why should she have that frightened look, as if some other catastrophe had happened?

I asked if there was any more dreadful news from home besides the news of Caroline's death. My aunt said, No, in a strange stifled voice, and suddenly turned her face from me. Was my father dead? No. My mother? No. Uncle George? My aunt trembled

all over as she said No, - to that also, and bade me cease asking any more questions. She was not fit to bear them yet, she said; and signed to the servant to lead me out of the room.

The next day I was told that I was to go home after the funeral, and was taken out towards evening by the housemaid, partly for a walk, partly to be measured for my mourning clothes. After we had left the tailor's, I persuaded the girl to extend our walk for some distance along the sea-beach, telling her, as we went, every little anecdote connected with my lost sister that came tenderly back to my memory in those first days of sorrow. She was so interested in hearing, and I in speaking, that we let the sun go down before we thought of turning back.

The evening was cloudy, and it got on from dusk to dark by the time we approached the town again. The housemaid was rather nervous at finding herself alone with me on the beach, and once or twice looked behind her distrustfully as we went on. Suddenly she squeezed my hand hard, and said —

“Let's get up on the cliff as fast as we can.”

The words were hardly out of her mouth before I heard footsteps behind me — a man came round quickly to my side, snatched me away from the girl, and catching me up in his arms, without a word, covered my face with kisses. I knew he was crying, because my cheeks were instantly wet with his tears; but it was too dark for me to see who he was, or even how he was dressed. He did not, I should think,

hold me half a minute in his arms. The housemaid screamed for help, I was put down gently on the sand, and the strange man instantly disappeared in the darkness.

When this extraordinary adventure was related to my aunt, she seemed at first merely bewildered at hearing of it; but in a moment more there came a change over her face, as if she had suddenly recollected or thought of something. She turned deadly pale, and said in a hurried way, very unusual with her —

“Never mind; don’t talk about it any more. It was only a mischievous trick to frighten you, I dare say. Forget all about it, my dear — forget all about it.”

It was easier to give this advice than to make me follow it. For many nights after, I thought of nothing but the strange man who had kissed me and cried over me.

Who could he be? Somebody who loved me very much, and who was very sorry. My childish logic carried me to that length. But when I tried to think over all the grown-up gentlemen who loved me very much, I could never get on, to my own satisfaction, beyond my father and my uncle George.

CHAPTER II.

I WAS taken home on the appointed day to suffer the trial — a hard one even at my tender years — of witnessing my mother's passionate grief and my father's mute despair. I remember that the scene of our first meeting after Caroline's death was wisely and considerately shortened by my aunt, who took me out of the room. She seemed to have a confused desire to keep me from leaving her after the door had closed behind us; but I broke away and ran downstairs to the surgery, to go and cry for my lost playmate with the sharer of all our games, Uncle George.

I opened the surgery-door, and could see nobody. I dried my tears, and looked all round the room: it was empty. I ran upstairs again to Uncle George's garret-bedroom — he was not there; his cheap hair-brush and old cast-off razor-case, that had belonged to my grand-father, were not on the dressing-table. Had he got some other bedroom? I went out on the landing, and called softly, with an unaccountable terror and sinking at my heart: —

“Uncle George!”

Nobody answered; but my aunt came hastily up the garret-stairs.

“Hush!” she said. “You must never call that name out here again!”

She stopped suddenly, and looked as if her own words had frightened her.

"Is Uncle George dead?" I asked.

My aunt turned red and pale, and stammered.

I did not wait to hear what she said — I brushed past her, down the stairs — my heart was bursting — my flesh felt cold. I ran breathlessly and recklessly into the room where my father and mother had received me. They were both sitting there still. I ran up to them, wringing my hands, and crying out in a passion of tears —

"Is Uncle George dead?"

My mother gave a scream that terrified me into instant silence and stillness. My father looked at her for a moment, rang the bell that summoned the maid, then seized me roughly by the arm, and dragged me out of the room.

He took me down into the study, seated himself in his accustomed chair, and put me before him between his knees. His lips were awfully white, and I felt his two hands, as they grasped my shoulders, shaking violently.

"You are never to mention the name of Uncle George again," he said in a quick, angry, trembling whisper. "Never to me, never to your mother, never to your aunt, never to anybody in this world! Never, never, never!"

The repetition of the word terrified me even more than the suppressed vehemence with which he spoke.

He saw that I was frightened, and softened his manner a little before he went on.

"You will never see Uncle George again," he said. "Your mother and I love you dearly; but if you forget what I have told you, you will be sent away from home. Never speak that name again — mind, never! Now kiss me, and go away."

How his lips trembled — and, oh, how cold they felt on mine!

I shrunk out of the room the moment he had kissed me, and went and hid myself in the garden.

"Uncle George is gone; I am never to see him any more; I am never to speak of him again" — those were the words I repeated to myself, with indescribable terror and confusion, the moment I was alone. There was something unspeakably horrible to my young mind in this mystery which I was commanded always to respect, and which, so far as I then knew, I could never hope to see revealed. My father, my mother, my aunt — all appeared to be separated from me now by some impassable barrier. Home seemed home no longer with Caroline dead, Uncle George gone, and a forbidden subject of talk perpetually and mysteriously interposing between my parents and me.

Though I never infringed the command my father had given me in his study (his words and looks, and that dreadful scream of my mother's, which seemed to be still ringing in my ears, were more than enough to ensure my obedience), I also never lost the secret de-

sire to penetrate the darkness which clouded over the fate of Uncle George.

For two years I remained at home and discovered nothing. If I asked the servants about my uncle, they could only tell me that one morning he disappeared from the house. Of the members of my father's family, I could make no inquiries. They lived far away, and never came to see us — and the idea of writing to them, at my age and in my position, was out of the question. My aunt was as unapproachably silent as my father and mother; but I never forgot how her face had altered, when she reflected for a moment, after hearing of my extraordinary adventure while going home with the servant over the sands at night. The more I thought of that change of countenance, in connection with what had occurred on my return to my father's house, the more certain I felt that the stranger who had kissed me and wept over me must have been no other than Uncle George.

At the end of my two years at home, I was sent to sea in the merchant navy by my own earnest desire. I had always determined to be a sailor from the time when I first went to stay with my aunt at the seaside — and I persisted long enough in my resolution to make my parents recognise the necessity of acceding to my wishes.

My new life delighted me; and I remained away on foreign stations more than four years. When I at length returned home, it was to find a new affliction darkening our fireside. My father had died on the

very day when I sailed for my return voyage to England.

Absence and change of scene had in no respect weakened my desire to penetrate the mystery of Uncle George's disappearance. My mother's health was so delicate, that I hesitated for some time to approach the forbidden subject in her presence. When I at last ventured to refer to it, suggesting to her that any prudent reserve, which might have been necessary while I was a child, need no longer be persisted in, now that I was growing to be a young man, she fell into a violent fit of trembling, and commanded me to say no more. It had been my father's will, she said, that the reserve to which I referred should be always adopted towards me; he had not authorised her, before he died, to speak more openly; and, now that he was gone, she would not so much as think of acting on her own unaided judgment. My aunt said the same thing in effect when I appealed to her. Determined not to be discouraged even yet, I undertook a journey, ostensibly to pay my respects to my father's family, but with the secret intention of trying what I could learn in that quarter on the subject of Uncle George.

My investigations led to some results, though they were by no means satisfactory. George had always been looked upon with something like contempt by his handsome sisters and his prosperous brothers; and he had not improved his position in the family by his warm advocacy of his brother's cause at the time of my father's marriage. I found that my uncle's sur-

viving relatives now spoke of him slightly and carelessly. They assured me that they had never heard from him, and that they knew nothing about him, except that he had gone away to settle, as they supposed, in some foreign place, after having behaved very basely and badly to my father. He had been traced to London, where he had sold out of the funds the small share of money which he had inherited after his father's death, and he had been seen on the deck of a packet bound for France, later on the same day. Beyond this, nothing was known about him. In what the alleged baseness of his behaviour had consisted, none of his brothers and sisters could tell me. My father had refused to pain them by going into particulars, not only at the time of his brother's disappearance, but afterwards whenever the subject was mentioned. George had always been the black sheep of the flock, and he must have been conscious of his own baseness, or he would certainly have written to explain and to justify himself.

Such were the particulars which I gleaned during my visit to my father's family. To my mind, they tended rather to deepen than to reveal the mystery. That such a gentle, docile, affectionate creature as Uncle George should have injured the brother he loved, by word or deed, at any period of their intercourse, seemed incredible; but that he should have been guilty of an act of baseness at the very time when my sister was dying, was simply and plainly impossible. And yet, there was the incomprehensible fact staring me in

the face, that the death of Caroline and the disappearance of Uncle George had taken place in the same week! Never did I feel more daunted and bewildered by the family secret, than after I had heard all the particulars in connection with it that my father's relatives had to tell me.

I may pass over the events of the next few years of my life briefly enough.

My nautical pursuits filled up all my time, and took me far away from my country and my friends. But, whatever I did, and wherever I went, the memory of Uncle George, and the desire to penetrate the mystery of his disappearance, haunted me like familiar spirits. Often, in the lonely watches of the night at sea, did I recall the dark evening on the beach, the strange man's hurried embrace, the startling sensation of feeling his tears on my cheeks, the disappearance of him before I had breath or self-possession enough to say a word. Often did I think over the inexplicable events that followed, when I had returned, after my sister's funeral, to my father's house; and oftener still did I puzzle my brains vainly, in the attempt to form some plan for inducing my mother or my aunt to disclose the secret which they had hitherto kept from me so perseveringly. My only chance of knowing what had really happened to Uncle George, my only hope of seeing him again, rested with those two near and dear relatives. I despaired of ever getting my mother to speak on the forbidden subject after what had passed between us; but I felt more sanguine about my

prospects of ultimately inducing my aunt to relax in her discretion. My anticipations, however, in this direction were not destined to be fulfilled. On my next visit to England I found my aunt prostrated by a paralytic attack, which deprived her of the power of speech. She died soon afterwards in my arms, leaving me her sole heir. I searched anxiously among her papers for some reference to the family mystery, but found no clue to guide me. All my mother's letters to her sister at the time of Caroline's illness and death had been destroyed.

CHAPTER III.

MORE years passed; my mother followed my aunt to the grave; and still I was as far as ever from making any discoveries in relation to Uncle George. Shortly after the period of this last affliction, my health gave way, and I departed, by my doctor's advice, to try some baths in the south of France.

I travelled slowly to my destination, turning aside from the direct road, and stopping wherever I pleased. One evening, when I was not more than two or three days' journey from the baths to which I was bound, I was struck by the picturesque situation of a little town placed on the brow of a hill at some distance from the main road, and resolved to have a nearer look at the place, with a view to stopping there for the night, if it pleased me. I found the principal inn clean and quiet — ordered my bed there — and after dinner strolled out to look at the church. No thought of Uncle George was in my mind when I entered the building; and yet, at that very moment, chance was leading me to the discovery which, for so many years past, I had vainly endeavoured to make — the discovery which I had given up as hopeless since the day of my mother's death.

I found nothing worth notice in the church, and was about to leave it again, when I caught a glimpse of a pretty view through a side door, and stopped to admire it.

The churchyard formed the foreground, and below it the hill-side sloped away gently into the plain, over which the sun was setting in full glory. The *curé* of the church was reading his breviary, walking up and down a gravel-path that parted the rows of graves. In the course of my wanderings I had learnt to speak French as fluently as most Englishmen; and when the priest came near me I said a few words in praise of the view, and complimented him on the neatness and prettiness of the churchyard. He answered with great politeness, and we got into conversation together immediately.

As we strolled along the gravel-walk, my attention was attracted by one of the graves standing apart from the rest. The cross at the head of it differed remarkably, in some points of appearance, from the crosses on the other graves. While all the rest had garlands hung on them, this one cross was quite bare; and, more extraordinary still, no name was inscribed on it.

The priest, observing that I stopped to look at the grave, shook his head and sighed.

"A countryman of yours is buried there," he said. "I was present at his death. He had borne the burden

I thought it best that I should begin by telling all that I have related here on the subject of Uncle George, and his disappearance from home. My host listened with a very sad face, and said, when I had done: —

“I can understand your anxiety to know what I am authorised to tell you — but pardon me if I say first that there are circumstances in your uncle’s story which it may pain you to hear —” he stopped suddenly.

“Which it may pain me to hear, as a nephew?” I asked.

“No,” said the priest, looking away from me, — “as a son.”

I gratefully expressed my sense of the delicacy and kindness which had prompted my companion’s warning, but I begged him at the same time to keep me no longer in suspense, and to tell me the stern truth, no matter how painfully it might affect me as a listener.

“In telling me all you knew about what you term the Family Secret,” said the priest, “you have mentioned as a strange coincidence that your sister’s death and your uncle’s disappearance took place at the same time. Did you ever suspect what cause it was that occasioned your sister’s death?”

“I only knew what my father told me, and what all our friends believed — that she died of a tumour

in the neck, or, as I sometimes heard it stated, from the effect on her constitution of a tumour in the neck."

"She died under an operation for the removal of that tumour," said the priest, in low tones. "And the operator was your Uncle George."

In those few words all the truth burst upon me.

"Console yourself with the thought that the long martyrdom of his life is over," the priest went on. "He rests: he is at peace. He and his little darling understand each other, and are happy now. That thought bore him up to the last, on his death-bed. He always spoke of your sister as his 'little darling.' He firmly believed that she was waiting to forgive and console him in the other world — and who shall say he was deceived in that belief?"

Not I! Not anyone who has ever loved and suffered, surely!

"It was out of the depths of his self-sacrificing love for the child that he drew the fatal courage to undertake the operation," continued the priest. "Your father naturally shrank from attempting it. His medical brethren, whom he consulted, all doubted the propriety of taking any measures for the removal of the tumour, in the particular condition and situation of it when they were called in. Your uncle alone differed with them. He was too modest a man to say so, but your mother found it out. The deformity of her beau-

tiful child horrified her; she was desperate enough to catch at the faintest hope of remedying it that anyone might hold out to her; and she persuaded your uncle to put his opinion to the proof. Her horror at the deformity of the child, and her despair at the prospect of its lasting for life, seem to have utterly blinded her to all natural sense of the danger of the operation. It is hard to know how to say it to you, her son, but it must be told, nevertheless, that, one day, when your father was out, she untruly informed your uncle that his brother had consented to the performance of the operation, and that he had gone purposely out of the house because he had not nerve enough to stay and witness it. After that, your uncle no longer hesitated. He had no fear of results, provided he could be certain of his own courage. All he dreaded was the effect on him of his love for the child, when he first found himself face to face with the dreadful necessity of touching her skin with the knife."

I tried hard to control myself; but I could not repress a shudder at those words.

"It is useless to shock you by going into particulars," said the priest, considerately. "Let it be enough if I say that your uncle's fortitude failed to support him when he wanted it most. His love for the child shook the firm hand which had never trembled before. In a word, the operation failed. Your father returned, and found his child dying. The frenzy of his despair, when the truth was told him, carried him

to excesses which it shocks me to mention — excesses which began in his degrading his brother by a blow, which ended in his binding himself by an oath to make that brother suffer public punishment, for his fatal rashness, in a court of law. Your uncle was too heart-broken by what had happened to feel those outrages as some men might have felt them. He looked for one moment at his sister-in-law (I do not like to say your mother, considering what I have now to tell you), to see if she would acknowledge that she had encouraged him to attempt the operation, and that she had deceived him in saying that he had his brother's permission to try it. She was silent, and when she spoke, it was to join her husband in denouncing him as the murderer of their child. Whether fear of your father's anger, or revengeful indignation against your uncle most actuated her, I cannot presume to inquire in your presence. I can only state facts."

The priest paused, and looked at me anxiously. I could not speak to him at that moment—I could only encourage him to proceed by pressing his hand.

He resumed in these terms: —

"Meanwhile, your uncle turned to your father, and spoke the last words he was ever to address to his eldest brother in this world. He said: — 'I have deserved the worst your anger can inflict on me, but I will spare you the scandal of bringing me to justice in open court. The law, if it found me guilty, could at

the worst but banish me from my country and my friends. I will go of my own accord. God is my witness that I honestly believed I could save the child from deformity and suffering. I have risked all, and lost all. My heart and spirit are broken. I am fit for nothing, but to go and hide myself and my shame and misery from all eyes that have ever looked on me. I shall never come back, never expect your pity or forgiveness. If you think less harshly of me when I am gone, keep secret what has happened; let no other lips say of me what yours and your wife's have said. I shall think that forbearance atonement enough, atonement greater than I have deserved. Forget me in this world. May we meet in another, where the secrets of all hearts are opened, and where the child who is gone before may make peace between us!' He said those words and went out. Your father never saw him or heard from him again."

I knew the reason now why my father had never confided the truth to anyone, his own family included. My mother had evidently confessed all to her sister, under the seal of secrecy. And there the dreadful disclosure had been arrested.

"Your uncle told me," the priest continued, "that before he left England, he took leave of you by stealth, in a place you were staying at by the seaside. He had not the heart to quit his country and his friends for ever, without kissing you for the last time. He followed you in the dark, and caught you up in his arms, and

left you again before you had a chance of discovering him. The next day he quitted England."

"For this place?" I asked.

"Yes: he had spent a week here once with a student friend, at the time when he was a pupil in the Hôtel Dieu. And to this place he returned to hide, to suffer, and to die. We all saw that he was a man crushed and broken by some great sorrow, and we respected him and his affliction. He lived alone, and only came out of doors towards evening, when he used to sit on the brow of the hill yonder, with his head on his hand, looking towards England. That place seemed a favourite with him, and he is buried close by it. He revealed the story of his past life to no living soul here but me; and to me he only spoke when his last hour was approaching. What he had suffered during his long exile, no man can presume to say. I, who saw more of him than anyone, never heard a word of complaint fall from his lips. He had the courage of the martyrs while he lived, and the resignation of the saints when he died. Just at the last his mind wandered. He said he saw his little darling waiting by the bedside to lead him away; and he died with a smile on his face — the first I had ever seen there."

The priest ceased, and we went out together in the mournful twilight, and stood for a little while on the brow of the hill where Uncle George used to sit, with his face turned towards England. How my heart ached for him, as I thought of what he must have suffered in

the silence and solitude of his long exile! Was it well for me that I had discovered the Family Secret at last? I have sometimes thought not. I have sometimes wished that the darkness had never been cleared away which once hid from me the fate of Uncle George.

END OF THE FAMILY SECRET.

THE BITER BIT.

THE BITER BIT.

[Extracted from the Correspondence of the London Police.]

FROM CHIEF INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE, OF THE DETECTIVE
POLICE, TO SERGEANT BULMER OF THE SAME FORCE.

LONDON, 4th July, 18—.

SERGEANT BULMER,

THIS is to inform you that you are wanted to assist in looking up a case of importance, which will require all the attention of an experienced member of the force. The matter of the robbery on which you are now engaged, you will please to shift over to the young man who brings you this letter. You will tell him all the circumstances of the case, just as they stand; you will put him up to the progress you have made (if any) towards detecting the person or persons by whom the money has been stolen; and you will leave him to make the best he can of the matter now in your hands. He is to have the whole responsibility of the case, and the whole credit of his success, if he brings it to a proper issue.

So much for the orders that I am desired to communicate to you.

A word in your ear, next, about this new man who is to take your place. His name is Matthew Sharpin; and he is to have the chance given him of dashing into our office at one jump — supposing he turns out strong enough to take it. You will naturally ask me how he comes by this privilege. I can only tell you that he has some uncommonly strong interest to back him in certain high quarters, which you and I had better not mention except under our breaths. He has been a lawyer's clerk; and he is wonderfully conceited in his opinion of himself, as well as mean and underhand to look at. According to his own account, he leaves his old trade, and joins ours, of his own free will and preference. You will no more believe that than I do. My notion is, that he has managed to ferret out some private information in connection with the affairs of one of his master's clients, which makes him rather an awkward customer to keep in the office for the future, and which, at the same time, gives him hold enough over his employer to make it dangerous to drive him into a corner by turning him away. I think the giving him this unheard of chance among us, is, in plain words, pretty much like giving him hush-money to keep him quiet. However that may be, Mr. Matthew Sharpin is to have the case now in your hands; and if he succeeds with it, he pokes his ugly nose into our office, as sure as fate. I put you up to this, Sergeant, so that

you may not stand in your own light by giving the new man any cause to complain of you at head-quarters, and remain yours,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

FROM MR. MATTHEW SHARPIN TO CHIEF INSPECTOR
THEAKSTONE.

LONDON, 5th July, 18—.

DEAR SIR,

Having now been favoured with the necessary instructions from Sergeant Bulmer, I beg to remind you of certain directions which I have received, relating to the report of my future proceedings which I am to prepare for examination at head-quarters.

The object of my writing, and of your examining what I have written, before you send it in to the higher authorities, is, I am informed, to give me, as an untried hand, the benefit of your advice, in case I want it (which I venture to think I shall not) at any stage of my proceedings. As the extraordinary circumstances of the case on which I am now engaged make it impossible for me to absent myself from the place where the robbery was committed, until I have made some progress towards discovering the thief, I am necessarily precluded from consulting you personally. Hence the necessity of my writing down the various details, which might, perhaps, be better communicated by word of mouth. This, if I am not mistaken, is the position in which we are now placed.

I state my own impressions on the subject, in writing, in order that we may clearly understand each other at the outset; — and have the honour to remain, your obedient servant,

MATTHEW SHARPIN.

FROM CHIEF INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE TO MR. MATTHEW SHARPIN.

SIR,

LONDON, 5th July, 18—.

You have begun by wasting time, ink, and paper. We both of us perfectly well knew the position we stood in towards each other, when I sent you with my letter to Sergeant Bulmer. There was not the least need to repeat it in writing. Be so good as to employ your pen, in future, on the business actually in hand.

You have now three separate matters on which to write me. First, You have to draw up a statement of your instructions received from Sergeant Bulmer, in order to show us that nothing has escaped your memory, and that you are thoroughly acquainted with all the circumstances of the case which has been entrusted to you. Secondly, You are to inform me what it is you propose to do. Thirdly, you are to report every inch of your progress (if you make any) from day to day, and, if need be, from hour to hour as well. This is *your* duty. As to what *my* duty may be, when I want you to remind me of it, I will write and tell you so. In the meantime, I remain, yours,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

FROM MR. MATTHEW SHARPIN TO CHIEF INSPECTOR
THEAKSTONE.

LONDON, 6th July, 18—.

SIR,

You are rather an elderly person, and, as such, naturally inclined to be a little jealous of men like me, who are in the prime of their lives and their faculties. Under these circumstances, it is my duty to be considerate towards you, and not to bear too hardly on your small failings. I decline, therefore, altogether, to take offence at the tone of your letter; I give you the full benefit of the natural generosity of my nature; I sponge the very existence of your surly communication out of my memory — in short, Chief Inspector Theakstone, I forgive you, and proceed to business.

My first duty is to draw up a full statement of the instructions I have received from Sergeant Bulmer. Here they are, at your service, according to my version of them.

At number 13, Rutherford Street, Soho, there is a stationer's shop. It is kept by one Mr. Yatman. He is a married man, but has no family. Besides Mr. and Mrs. Yatman, the other inmates in the house are a lodger, a young single man named Jay, who occupies the front room on the second floor — a shopman, who sleeps in one of the attics, — and a servant-of-all-work, whose bed is in the back-kitchen. Once a week a charwoman comes to help this servant. These are all the persons who, on ordinary occasions,

have means of access to the interior of the house, placed, as a matter of course, at their disposal.

Mr. Yatman has been in business for many years, carrying on his affairs prosperously enough to realize a handsome independence for a person in his position. Unfortunately for himself, he endeavoured to increase the amount of his property by speculating. He ventured boldly in his investments, luck went against him, and rather less than two years ago he found himself a poor man again. All that was saved out of the wreck of his property was the sum of two hundred pounds.

Although Mr. Yatman did his best to meet his altered circumstances, by giving up many of the luxuries and comforts to which he and his wife had been accustomed, he found it impossible to retrench so far as to allow of putting by any money from the income produced by his shop. The business has been declining of late years — the cheap advertising stationers having done it injury with the public. Consequently, up to the last week, the only surplus property possessed by Mr. Yatman, consisted of the two hundred pounds which had been recovered from the wreck of his fortune. This sum was placed as a deposit in a joint-stock bank of the highest possible character.

Eight days ago, Mr. Yatman and his lodger, Mr. Jay, held a conversation on the subject of the commercial difficulties which are hampering trade in all directions at the present time. Mr. Jay (who lives by supplying the newspapers with short paragraphs

relating to accidents, offences, and brief records of remarkable occurrences in general — who is, in short, what they call a penny-a-liner) told his landlord that he had been in the city that day and heard unfavorable rumours on the subject of the joint-stock banks. The rumours to which he alluded had already reached the ears of Mr. Yatman from other quarters; and the confirmation of them by his lodger had such an effect on his mind — predisposed as it was to alarm by the experience of his former losses — that he resolved to go at once to the bank and withdraw his deposit. It was then getting on toward the end of the afternoon; and he arrived just in time to receive his money before the bank closed.

He received the deposit in bank notes of the following amounts: — one fifty-pound note, three twenty-pound notes, six ten-pound notes, and six five-pound notes. His object in drawing the money in this form was to have it ready to lay out immediately in trifling loans, on good security, among the small tradespeople of his district, some of whom are sorely pressed for the very means of existence at the present time. Investments of this kind seemed to Mr. Yatman to be the most safe and the most profitable on which he could now venture.

He brought the money back in an envelope placed in his breast-pocket; and asked his shopman, on getting home, to look for a small flat tin cash-box, which had not been used for years, and which, as Mr. Yatman remembered it, was exactly of the right size to hold

the bank notes. For some time the cash-box was searched for in vain. Mr. Yatman called to his wife to know if she had any idea where it was. The question was overheard by the servant-of-all-work, who was taking up the tea-tray at the time, and by Mr. Jay, who was coming down stairs on his way out to the theatre. Ultimately the cash-box was found by the shopman. Mr. Yatman placed the bank-notes in it, secured them by a padlock, and put the box in his coat-pocket. It stuck out of the coat-pocket a very little, but enough to be seen. Mr. Yatman remained at home, up stairs, all that evening. No visitors called. At eleven o'clock he went to bed, and put the cash-box under his pillow.

When he and his wife woke the next morning, the box was gone. Payment of the notes was immediately stopped at the bank of England; but no news of the money has been heard of since that time.

So far, the circumstances of the case are perfectly clear. They point unmistakably to the conclusion that the robbery must have been committed by some person living in the house. Suspicion falls, therefore, upon the servant-of-all-work, upon the shopman, and upon Mr. Jay. The two first knew that the cash-box was being inquired for by their master, but did not know what it was he wanted to put into it. They would assume, of course, that it was money. They both had opportunities (the servant, when she took away the tea — and the shopman, when he came, after shutting up, to give the keys of the till to his master) of seeing

the cash-box in Mr. Yatman's pocket, and of inferring naturally, from its position there, that he intended to take it into his bedroom with him at night.

Mr. Jay, on the other hand, had been told, during the afternoon's conversation on the subject of joint-stock banks, that his landlord had a deposit of two hundred pounds in one of them. He also knew that Mr. Yatman left him with the intention of drawing that money out; and he heard the inquiry for the cash-box, afterwards, when he was coming down stairs. He must, therefore, have inferred that the money was in the house, and that the cash-box was the receptacle intended to contain it. That he could have had any idea, however, of the place in which Mr. Yatman intended to keep it for the night, is impossible, seeing that he went out before the box was found, and did not return till his landlord was in bed. Consequently, if he committed the robbery, he must have gone into the bedroom purely on speculation.

Speaking of the bedroom reminds me of the necessity of noticing the situation of it in the house, and the means that exist of gaining easy access to it at any hour of the night.

The room in question is the back-room on the first-floor. In consequence of Mrs. Yatman's constitutional nervousness on the subject of fire, which makes her apprehend being burnt alive in her room, in case of accident, by the hampering of the lock if the key is turned in it, her husband has never been accustomed

to lock the bedroom door. Both he and his wife are, by their own admission, heavy sleepers. Consequently the risk to be run by any evil-disposed persons wishing to plunder the bedroom, was of the most trifling kind. They could enter the room by merely turning the handle of the door; and if they moved with ordinary caution, there was no fear of their waking the sleepers inside. This fact is of importance. It strengthens our conviction that the money must have been taken by one of the inmates of the house, because it tends to show that the robbery, in this case, might have been committed by persons not possessed of the superior vigilance and cunning of the experienced thief.

Such are the circumstances, as they were related to Sergeant Bulmer, when he was first called in to discover the guilty parties, and, if possible, to recover the lost bank notes. The strictest inquiry which he could institute failed of producing the smallest fragment of evidence against any of the persons on whom suspicion naturally fell. Their language and behaviour, on being informed of the robbery, was perfectly consistent with the language and behaviour of innocent people. Sergeant Bulmer felt from the first that this was a case for private inquiry and secret observation. He began by recommending Mr. and Mrs. Yatman to affect a feeling of perfect confidence in the innocence of the persons living under their roof; and he then opened the campaign by employing himself in following the goings and comings, and in discovering the friends, the habits, and the secrets of the maid-of-all-work.

Three days and nights of exertion on his own part, and on that of others who were competent to assist his investigations, were enough to satisfy him that there was no sound cause for suspicion against the girl.

He next practised the same precaution in relation to the shopman. There was more difficulty and uncertainty in privately clearing up this person's character without his knowledge, but the obstacles were at last smoothed away with tolerable success; and though there is not the same amount of certainty, in this case, which there was in the case of the girl, there is still fair reason for supposing that the shopman has had nothing to do with the robbery of the cash-box.

As a necessary consequence of these proceedings, the range of suspicion now becomes limited to the lodger, Mr. Jay.

When I presented your letter of introduction to Sergeant Bulmer, he had already made some inquiries on the subject of this young man. The result, so far, has not been at all favourable. Mr. Jay's habits are irregular; he frequents public houses, and seems to be familiarly acquainted with a great many dissolute characters; he is in debt to most of the tradespeople whom he employs; he has not paid his rent to Mr. Yatman for the last month; yesterday evening he came home excited by liquor, and last week he was seen talking to a prize-fighter. In short, though Mr. Jay does call himself a journalist, in virtue of his penny-a-line contributions to the newspapers, he is a young man of low tastes, vulgar manners, and bad habits. Nothing

has yet been discovered, in relation to him, which redounds to his credit in the smallest degree.

I have now reported, down to the very last details, all the particulars communicated to me by Sergeant Bulmer. I believe you will not find an omission anywhere; and I think you will admit, though you are prejudiced against me, that a clearer statement of facts was never laid before you than the statement I have now made. My next duty is to tell you what I propose to do, now that the case is confided to my hands.

In the first place, it is clearly my business to take up the case at the point where Sergeant Bulmer has left it. On his authority, I am justified in assuming that I have no need to trouble myself about the maid-of-all-work and the shopman. Their characters are now to be considered as cleared up. What remains to be privately investigated is the question of the guilt or innocence of Mr. Jay. Before we give up the notes for lost, we must make sure, if we can, that he knows nothing about them.

This is the plan that I have adopted, with the full approval of Mr. and Mrs. Yatman, for discovering whether Mr. Jay is or is not the person who has stolen the cash-box: —

I propose, to-day, to present myself at the house in the character of a young man who is looking for lodgings. The back room on the second-floor will be shown to me as the room to let; and I shall establish myself there to-night, as a person from the country

who has come to London to look for a situation in a respectable shop or office.

By this means I shall be living next to the room occupied by Mr. Jay. The partition between us is mere lath and plaster. I shall make a small hole in it, near the cornice, through which I can see what Mr. Jay does in his room, and hear every word that is said when any friend happens to call on him. Whenever he is at home, I shall be at my post of observation. Whenever he goes out, I shall be after him. By employing these means of watching him, I believe I may look forward to the discovery of his secret — if he knows anything about the lost bank notes — as to a dead certainty.

What you may think of my plan of observation I cannot undertake to say. It appears to me to unite the invaluable merits of boldness and simplicity. Fortified by this conviction, I close the present communication with feelings of the most sanguine description in regard to the future, and remain your obedient servant,
MATTHEW SHARPIN.

FROM THE SAME TO THE SAME.

7th July.

SIR,

As you have not honoured me with any answer to my last communication, I assume that, in spite of your prejudices against me, it has produced the favourable impression on your mind which I ventured to anticipate. Gratified and encouraged beyond measure by the token

of approval which your eloquent silence conveys to me, I proceed to report the progress that has been made in the course of the last twenty-four hours.

I am now comfortably established next door to Mr. Jay; and I am delighted to say that I have two holes in the partition, instead of one. My natural sense of humour has led me into the pardonable extravagance of giving them both appropriate names. One I call my Peep-hole, and the other my Pipe-hole. The name of the first explains itself; the name of the second refers to a small tin pipe, or tube, inserted in the hole, and twisted so that the mouth of it comes close to my ear, while I am standing at my post of observation. Thus, while I am looking at Mr. Jay through my Peep-hole, I can hear every word that may be spoken in his room through my Pipe-hole.

Perfect candour — a virtue which I have possessed from my childhood — compels me to acknowledge, before I go any further, that the ingenious notion of adding a Pipe-hole to my proposed Peep-hole originated with Mrs. Yatman. This lady — a most intelligent and accomplished person, simple, and yet distinguished, in her manners — has entered into all my little plans with an enthusiasm and intelligence which I cannot too highly praise. Mr. Yatman is so cast down by his loss, that he is quite incapable of affording me any assistance. Mrs. Yatman, who is evidently most tenderly attached to him, feels her husband's sad condition of mind even more acutely than she feels the loss of the money; and is mainly stimulated to exertion by her de-

sire to assist in raising him from the miserable state of prostration into which he has now fallen.

"The money, Mr. Sharpin," she said to me yesterday evening, with tears in her eyes, "the money may be regained by rigid economy and strict attention to business. It is my husband's wretched state of mind that makes me so anxious for the discovery of the thief. I may be wrong, but I felt hopeful of success as soon as you entered the house; and I believe that, if the wretch who has robbed us is to be found, you are the man to discover him." I accepted this gratifying compliment in the spirit in which it was offered — firmly believing that I shall be found, sooner or later, to have thoroughly deserved it.

Let me now return to business — that is to say, to my Peep-hole and my Pipe-hole.

I have enjoyed some hours of calm observation of Mr. Jay. Though rarely at home, as I understand from Mrs. Yatman, on ordinary occasions, he has been in-doors the whole of this day. That is suspicious, to begin with. I have to report, further, that he rose at a late hour this morning (always a bad sign in a young man), and that he lost a great deal of time, after he was up, in yawning and complaining to himself of headache. Like other debauched characters, he ate little or nothing for breakfast. His next proceeding was to smoke a pipe — a dirty clay pipe, which a gentleman would have been ashamed to put between his lips. When he had done smoking, he took out pen, ink, and paper, and sat down to write with a

groan — whether of remorse for having taken the bank notes, or of disgust at the task before him, I am unable to say. After writing a few lines (too far away from my Peep-hole to give me a chance of reading over his shoulder), he leaned back in his chair, and amused himself by humming the tunes of popular songs. I recognised “My Mary Anne,” “Bobbin’ around,” and “Old Dog Tray,” among other melodies. Whether these do or do not represent secret signals by which he communicates with his accomplices remains to be seen. After he had amused himself for some time by humming, he got up and began to walk about the room, occasionally stopping to add a sentence to the paper on his desk. Before long he went to a locked cupboard and opened it. I strained my eyes eagerly, in expectation of making a discovery. I saw him take something carefully out of the cupboard — he turned round — and it was only a pint bottle of brandy! Having drunk some of the liquor, this extremely indolent reprobate lay down on his bed again, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

After hearing him snoring for at least two hours, I was recalled to my Peep-hole by a knock at his door. He jumped up and opened it with suspicious activity.

A very small boy, with a very dirty face, walked in, said, “Please, sir, they’re waiting for you,” sat down on a chair, with his legs a long way from the ground, and instantly fell asleep! Mr. Jay swore an oath, tied a wet towel round his head, and, going back to his paper, began to cover it with writing as fast as

his fingers could move the pen. Occasionally getting up to dip the towel in water and tie it on again, he continued at this employment for nearly three hours; then folded up the leaves of writing, woke the boy, and gave them to him, with this remarkable expression: — “Now, then, young sleepy-head, quick march! If you see the governor, tell him to have the money ready for me when I call for it.” The boy grinned, and disappeared. I was sorely tempted to follow “sleepy head,” but, on reflection, considered it safest still to keep my eye on the proceedings of Mr. Jay.

In half an hour's time, he put on his hat and walked out. Of course, I put on my hat and walked out also. As I went down stairs, I passed Mrs. Yatman going up. The lady has been kind enough to undertake, by previous arrangement between us, to search Mr. Jay's room, while he is out of the way, and while I am necessarily engaged in the pleasing duty of following him wherever he goes. On the occasion to which I now refer, he walked straight to the nearest tavern, and ordered a couple of mutton chops for his dinner. I placed myself in the next box to him, and ordered a couple of mutton chops for my dinner. Before I had been in the room a minute, a young man of highly suspicious manners and appearance, sitting at a table opposite, took his glass of porter in his hand and joined Mr. Jay. I pretended to be reading the newspaper, and listened, as in duty bound, with all my might.

"Jack has been here inquiring after you," says the young man.

"Did he leave any message?" asks Mr. Jay.

"Yes," says the other. "He told me, if I met with you, to say that he wished very particularly to see you to-night; and that he would give you a look in, at Rutherford Street, at seven o'clock."

"All right," says Mr. Jay. "I'll get back in time to see him."

Upon this, the suspicious-looking young man finished his porter, and saying that he was rather in a hurry, took leave of his friend (perhaps I should not be wrong if I said his accomplice) and left the room.

At twenty-five minutes and a half past six — in these serious cases it is important to be particular about time — Mr. Jay finished his chops and paid his bill. At twenty-six minutes and three-quarters, I finished my chops and paid mine. In ten minutes more I was inside the house in Rutherford Street, and was received by Mrs. Yatman in the passage. That charming woman's face exhibited an expression of melancholy and disappointment which it quite grieved me to see.

"I am afraid, Ma'am," says I, "that you have not hit on any little criminating discovery in the lodger's room?"

She shook her head and sighed. It was a soft, languid, fluttering sigh — and, upon my life, it quite upset me. For the moment I forgot business, and burned with envy of Mr. Yatman.

"Don't despair, Ma'am," I said, with an insinuating mildness which seemed to touch her. "I have heard a mysterious conversation — I know of a guilty appointment — and I expect great things from my Peep-hole and my Pipe-hole to-night. Pray, don't be alarmed, but I think we are on the brink of a discovery."

Here my enthusiastic devotion to business got the better of my tender feelings. I looked — winked — nodded — left her.

When I got back to my observatory, I found Mr. Jay digesting his mutton-chops in an arm-chair, with his pipe in his mouth. On his table were two tumblers, a jug of water, and the pint-bottle of brandy. It was then close upon seven o'clock. As the hour struck, the person described as "Jack" walked in.

He looked agitated — I am happy to say he looked violently agitated. The cheerful glow of anticipated success diffused itself (to use a strong expression) all over me, from head to foot. With breathless interest I looked through my Peep-hole, and saw the visitor — the "Jack" of this delightful case — sit down, facing me, at the opposite side of the table to Mr. Jay. Making allowance for the difference in expression which their countenances just now happened to exhibit, these two abandoned villains were so much alike in other respects as to lead at once to the conclusion that they were brothers. Jack was the cleaner man and the better dressed of the two. I admit that, at the outset. It is, perhaps, one of my failings to push justice and impartiality to their utmost limits. I am no Pharisee; and

where Vice has its redeeming point, I say, let Vice have its due — yes, yes, by all manner of means, let Vice have its due.

“What’s the matter now, Jack?” says Mr. Jay.

“Can’t you see it in my face?” says Jack. “My dear fellow, delays are dangerous. Let us have done with suspense, and risk it the day after to-morrow.”

“So soon as that?” cries Mr. Jay, looking very much astonished. “Well, I’m ready, if you are. But, I say, Jack, is Somebody Else ready, too? Are you quite sure of that?”

He smiled, as he spoke — a frightful smile — and laid a very strong emphasis on those two words, “Somebody Else.” There is evidently a third ruffian, a nameless desperado, concerned in the business.

“Meet us to-morrow,” says Jack, “and judge for yourself. Be in the Regent’s Park at eleven in the morning, and look out for us at the turning that leads to the Avenue Road.”

“I’ll be there,” says Mr. Jay. “Have a drop of brandy and water? What are you getting up for? You’re not going already?”

“Yes, I am,” says Jack. “The fact is, I’m so excited and agitated that I can’t sit still anywhere for five minutes together. Ridiculous as it may appear to you, I’m in a perpetual state of nervous flutter. I can’t, for the life of me, help fearing that we shall be found out. I fancy that every man who looks twice at me in the street is a spy” —

At those words, I thought my legs would have

given way under me. Nothing but strength of mind kept me at my Peep-hole — nothing else, I give you my word of honour.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cries Mr. Jay, with all the effrontery of a veteran in crime. "We have kept the secret up to this time, and we will manage cleverly to the end. Have a drop of brandy and water, and you will feel as certain about it as I do."

Jack steadily refused the brandy and water, and steadily persisted in taking his leave.

"I must try if I can't walk it off," he said. "Remember to-morrow morning — eleven o'clock, Avenue Road side of the Regent's Park."

With those words he went out. His hardened relative laughed desperately, and resumed the dirty clay pipe.

I sat down on the side of my bed, actually quivering with excitement.

It is clear to me that no attempt has yet been made to change the stolen bank notes; and I may add that Sergeant Bulmer was of that opinion also, when he left the case in my hands. What is the natural conclusion to draw from the conversation which I have just set down? Evidently, that the confederates meet to-morrow to take their respective shares in the stolen money, and to decide on the safest means of getting the notes changed the day after. Mr. Jay is, beyond a doubt, the leading criminal in this business, and he will probably run the chief risk — that of changing the fifty-pound note. I shall, therefore, still make it my

business to follow him — attending at the Regent's Park to-morrow, and doing my best to hear what is said there. If another appointment is made for the day after, I shall, of course, go to it. In the meantime, I shall want the immediate assistance of two competent persons (supposing the rascals separate after their meeting) to follow the two minor criminals. It is only fair to add, that, if the rogues all retire together, I shall probably keep my subordinates in reserve. Being naturally ambitious, I desire, if possible, to have the whole credit of discovering this robbery to myself.

8th July.

I have to acknowledge, with thanks, the speedy arrival of my two subordinates — men of very average abilities, I am afraid; but, fortunately, I shall always be on the spot to direct them.

My first business this morning was, necessarily, to prevent possible mistakes by accounting to Mr. and Mrs. Yatman for the presence of two strangers on the scene. Mr. Yatman (between ourselves, a poor, feeble man) only shook his head and groaned. Mrs. Yatman (that superior woman) favoured me with a charming look of intelligence.

"Oh, Mr. Sharpin!" she said, "I am so sorry to see those two men! Your sending for their assistance looks as if you were beginning to be doubtful of success."

I privately winked at her (she is very good in

allowing me to do so without taking offence), and told her, in my facetious way, that she laboured under a slight mistake.

"It is because I am sure of success, Ma'am, that I send for them. I am determined to recover the money, not for my own sake only, but for Mr. Yatman's sake — and for yours."

I laid a considerable amount of stress on those last three words. She said, "Oh, Mr. Sharpin!" again — and blushed of a heavenly red — and looked down at her work. I could go to the world's end with that woman, if Mr. Yatman would only die.

I sent off the two subordinates to wait, until I wanted them, at the Avenue Road gate of the Regent's Park. Half an hour afterwards I was following the same direction myself, at the heels of Mr. Jay.

The two confederates were punctual to the appointed time, I blush to record it, but it is nevertheless necessary to state, that the third rogue — the nameless desperado of my report, or, if you prefer it, the mysterious "Somebody Else" of the conversation between the two brothers — is — a woman! and, what is worse, a young woman! and, what is more lamentable still, a nice-looking woman! I have long resisted a growing conviction, that, wherever there is mischief in this world, an individual of the fair sex is inevitably certain to be mixed up in it. After the experience of this morning, I can struggle against that sad conclusion no longer. I give up the sex — excepting Mrs. Yatman, I give up the sex.

The man named "Jack" offered the woman his arm. Mr. Jay placed himself on the other side of her. The three then walked away slowly among the trees. I followed them at a respectful distance. My two subordinates, at a respectful distance also, followed me.

It was, I deeply regret to say, impossible to get near enough to them to overhear their conversation, without running too great a risk of being discovered. I could only infer from their gestures and actions that they were all three talking with extraordinary earnestness on some subject which deeply interested them. After having been engaged in this way a full quarter of an hour, they suddenly turned round to retrace their steps. My presence of mind did not forsake me in this emergency. I signed to the two subordinates to walk on carelessly and pass them, while I myself slipped dexterously behind a tree. As they came by me, I heard "Jack" address these words to Mr. Jay: —

"Let us say half-past ten to-morrow morning. And mind you come in a cab. We had better not risk taking one in this neighbourhood."

Mr. Jay made some brief reply, which I could not overhear. They walked back to the place at which they had met, shaking hands there with an audacious cordiality which it quite sickened me to see. They then separated. I followed Mr. Jay. My subordinates paid the same delicate attention to the other two.

Instead of taking me back to Rutherford Street, Mr. Jay led me to the Strand. He stopped at a dingy,

disreputable-looking house, which, according to the inscription over the door, was a newspaper office, but which, in my judgment, had all the external appearance of a place devoted to the reception of stolen goods.

After remaining inside for a few minutes, he came out, whistling, with his finger and thumb in his waistcoat pocket. Some men would now have arrested him on the spot. I remembered the necessity of catching the two confederates, and the importance of not interfering with the appointment that had been made for the next morning. Such coolness as this, under trying circumstances, is rarely to be found, I should imagine, in a young beginner, whose reputation as a detective policeman is still to make.

From the house of suspicious appearance, Mr. Jay betook himself to a cigar-divan, and read the magazines over a cheroot. I sat at a table near him, and read the magazines likewise over a cheroot. From the divan he strolled to the tavern and had his chops. I strolled to the tavern and had my chops. When he had done, he went back to his lodging. When I had done, I went back to mine. He was overcome with drowsiness early in the evening, and went to bed. As soon as I heard him snoring, I was overcome with drowsiness, and went to bed also.

Early in the morning my two subordinates came to make their report.

They had seen the man named "Jack" leave the woman at the gate of an apparently respectable villa-

residence, not far from the Regent's Park. Left to himself, he took a turning to the right, which led to a sort of suburban street, principally inhabited by shopkeepers. He stopped at the private door of one of the houses, and let himself in with his own key — looking about him as he opened the door, and staring suspiciously at my men as they lounged along on the opposite side of the way. These were all the particulars which the subordinates had to communicate. I kept them in my room to attend on me, if needful, and mounted to my Peep-hole to have a look at Mr. Jay.

He was occupied in dressing himself, and was taking extraordinary pains to destroy all traces of the natural slovenliness of his appearance. This was precisely what I expected. A vagabond like Mr. Jay knows the importance of giving himself a respectable look when he is going to run the risk of changing a stolen bank note. At five minutes past ten o'clock he had given the last brush to his shabby hat and the last scouring with bread-crumbs to his dirty gloves. At ten minutes past ten he was in the street, on his way to the nearest cab-stand, and I and my subordinates were close on his heels.

He took a cab, and we took a cab. I had not overheard them appoint a place of meeting, when following them in the Park on the previous day; but I soon found that we were proceeding in the old direction of the Avenue Road gate. The cab in which Mr. Jay was riding turned into the Park slowly. We stopped outside, to avoid exciting suspicion. I got out to

follow the cab on foot. Just as I did so, I saw it stop, and detected the two confederates approaching it from among the trees. They got in, and the cab was turned about directly. I ran back to my own cab, and told the driver to let them pass him, and then to follow as before.

The man obeyed my directions, but so clumsily as to excite their suspicions. We had been driving after them about three minutes (returning along the road by which we had advanced) when I looked out of the window to see how far they might be ahead of us. As I did this, I saw two hats popped out of the windows of their cab, and two faces looking back at me. I sank into my place in a cold sweat; — the expression is coarse, but no other form of words can describe my condition at that trying moment.

"We are found out!" I said, faintly to my two subordinates. They stared at me in astonishment. My feelings changed instantly from the depth of despair to the height of indignation.

"It is the cabman's fault. Get out, one of you," I said, with dignity — "get out, and punch his head."

Instead of following my directions (I should wish this act of disobedience to be reported at head-quarters) they both looked out of the window. Before I could pull them back, they both sat down again. Before I could express my just indignation, they both grinned, and said to me, "Please to look out, sir!"

I did look out. Their cab had stopped.

Where?

At a church door!

What effect this discovery might have had upon the ordinary run of men, I don't know. Being of a strong religious turn myself, it filled me with horror. I have often read of the unprincipled cunning of criminal persons; but I never before heard of three thieves attempting to double on their pursuers by entering a church! The sacrilegious audacity of that proceeding is, I should think, unparalleled in the annals of crime.

I checked my grinning subordinates by a frown. It was easy to see what was passing in their superficial minds. If I had not been able to look below the surface, I might, on observing two nicely dressed men and one nicely dressed woman enter a church before eleven in the morning on a week day, have come to the same hasty conclusion at which my inferiors had evidently arrived. As it was, appearances had no power to impose on *me*. I got out, and, followed by one of my men, entered the church. The other man I sent round to watch the vestry door. You may catch a weasel asleep — but not your humble servant, Matthew Sharpin!

We stole up the gallery stairs, diverged to the organ loft, and peered through the curtains in front. There they were, all three, sitting in a pew below — yes, incredible as it may appear, sitting in a pew below!

Before I could determine what to do, a clergyman made his appearance in full canonicals, from the vestry door, followed by a clerk. My brain whirled, and my

eyesight grew dim. Dark remembrances of robberies committed in vestries floated through my mind. I trembled for the excellent man in full canonicals — I even trembled for the clerk.

The clergyman placed himself inside the altar rails. The three desperadoes approached him. He opened his book, and began to read. What? — you will ask.

I answer, without the slightest hesitation, the first lines of the Marriage Service.

My subordinate had the audacity to look at me, and then to stuff his pocket-handkerchief into his mouth. I scorned to pay any attention to him. After I had discovered that the man "Jack" was the bridegroom, and that the man Jay acted the part of father, and gave away the bride, I left the church, followed by my men, and joined the other subordinate outside the vestry door. Some people in my position would now have felt rather crestfallen, and would have begun to think that they had made a very foolish mistake. Not the faintest misgiving of any kind troubled me. I did not feel in the slightest degree depreciated in my own estimation. And even now, after a lapse of three hours, my mind remains, I am happy to say, in the same calm and hopeful condition.

As soon as I and my subordinates were assembled together outside the church, I intimated my intention of still following the other cab, in spite of what had occurred. My reason for deciding on this course will appear presently. The two subordinates appeared to

be astonished at my resolution. One of them had the impertinence to say to me: —

“If you please, sir, who is it that we are after? A man who has stolen money, or a man who has stolen a wife?”

The other low person encouraged him by laughing. Both have deserved an official reprimand; and both, I sincerely trust, will be sure to get it.

When the marriage ceremony was over, the three got into their cab; and once more our vehicle (neatly hidden round the corner of the church, so that they could not suspect it to be near them) started to follow theirs.

We traced them to the terminus of the South-Western Railway. The newly married couple took tickets for Richmond — paying their fare with a half sovereign, and so depriving me of the pleasure of arresting them, which I should certainly have done, if they had offered a bank note. They parted from Mr. Jay, saying, “Remember the address, — 14, Babylon Terrace. You dine with us to-morrow week.” Mr. Jay accepted the invitation, and added, jocosely, that he was going home at once to get off his clean clothes, and to be comfortable and dirty again for the rest of the day. I have to report that I saw him home safely, and that he is comfortable and dirty again (to use his own disgraceful language) at the present moment.

Here the affair rests, having by this time reached what I may call its first stage.

I know very well what persons of hasty judgment

will be inclined to say of my proceedings thus far. They will assert that I have been deceiving myself all through, in the most absurd way; they will declare that the suspicious conversations which I have reported referred solely to the difficulties and dangers of successfully carrying out a run-away match; and they will appeal to the scene in the church, as offering undeniable proof of the correctness of their assertions. So let it be. I dispute nothing up to this point. But I ask a question, out of the depths of my own sagacity as a man of the world, which the bitterest of my enemies will not, I think, find it particularly easy to answer.

Granted the fact of the marriage, what proof does it afford me of the innocence of the three persons concerned in that clandestine transaction? It gives me none. On the contrary, it strengthens my suspicions against Mr. Jay and his confederates, because it suggests a distinct motive for their stealing the money. A gentleman who is going to spend his honeymoon at Richmond wants money; and a gentleman who is in debt to all his tradespeople wants money. Is this an unjustifiable imputation of bad motives? In the name of outraged Morality, I deny it. These men have combined together, and have stolen a woman. Why should they not combine together, and steal a cash-box? I take my stand on the logic of rigid Virtue; and I defy all the sophistry of Vice to move me an inch out of my position.

Speaking of virtue, I may add that I have put this

view of the case to Mr. and Mrs. Yatman. That accomplished and charming woman found it difficult, at first, to follow the close chain of my reasoning. I am free to confess that she shook her head, and shed tears, and joined her husband in premature lamentation over the loss of the two hundred pounds. But a little careful explanation on my part, and a little attentive listening on hers, ultimately changed her opinion. She now agrees with me, that there is nothing in this unexpected circumstance of the clandestine marriage which absolutely tends to divert suspicion from Mr. Jay, or Mr. "Jack," or the runaway lady. "Audacious hussy" was the term my fair friend used in speaking of her, but let that pass. It is more to the purpose to record that Mrs. Yatman has not lost confidence in me, and that Mr. Yatman promises to follow her example and do his best to look hopefully for future results.

I have now, in the new turn that circumstances have taken, to await advice from your office. I pause for fresh orders with all the composure of a man who has got two strings to his bow. When I traced the three confederates from the church door to the railway terminus, I had two motives for doing so. First, I followed them as a matter of official business, believing them still to have been guilty of the robbery. Secondly, I followed them as a matter of private speculation, with a view of discovering the place of refuge to which the runaway couple intended to retreat, and of making my information a marketable commodity to offer to the young lady's family and friends. Thus,

whatever happens, I may congratulate myself beforehand on not having wasted my time. If the office approves of my conduct, I have my plan ready for further proceedings. If the office blames me, I shall take myself off, with my marketable information, to the genteel villa-residence in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park. Any way, the affair puts money into my pocket, and does credit to my penetration as an uncommonly sharp man.

I have only one word more to add, and it is this: — If any individual ventures to assert that Mr. Jay and his confederates are innocent of all share in the stealing of the cash-box, I, in return, defy that individual — though he may even be Chief Inspector Theakstone himself — to tell me who has committed the robbery at Rutherford Street, Soho.

Strong in that conviction,

I have the honour to be,

Your very obedient servant,

MATTHEW SHARPIN.

FROM CHIEF INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE TO SERGEANT
BULMER.

BIRMINGHAM, July 9th.

SERGEANT BULMER,

That empty-headed puppy, Mr. Matthew Sharpin, has made a mess of the case at Rutherford Street, exactly as I expected he would. Business keeps me in this town; so I write to you to set the matter straight. I enclose, with this, the pages of feeble scribble-scrabble

which the creature, Sharpin, calls a report. Look them over; and when you have made your way through all the gabble, I think you will agree with me that the conceited booby has looked for the thief in every direction but the right one. You can lay your hand on the guilty person in five minutes, now. Settle the case at once; forward your report to me at this place; and tell Mr. Sharpin that he is suspended till further notice.

Yours,
FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

FROM SERGEANT BULMER TO CHIEF INSPECTOR
THEAKSTONE.

LONDON, July 10th.

INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE,

Your letter and enclosure came safe to hand. Wise men, they say, may always learn something, even from a fool. By the time I had got through Sharpin's maundering report of his own folly, I saw my way clear enough to the end of the Rutherford Street case, just as you thought I should. In half an hour's time I was at the house. The first person I saw there was Mr. Sharpin himself.

"Have you come to help me?" says he.

"Not exactly," says I. "I've come to tell you that you are suspended till further notice."

"Very good," says he, not taken down, by so much as a single peg, in his own estimation. "I thought you would be jealous of me. It's very natural; and I don't

blame you. Walk in, pray, and make yourself at home. I'm off to do a little detective business on my own account, in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park. Ta-ta, sergeant, ta-ta!"

With those words he took himself out of the way — which was exactly what I wanted him to do.

As soon as the maid-servant had shut the door, I told her to inform her master that I wanted to say a word to him in private. She showed me into the parlour behind the shop; and there was Mr. Yatman, all alone, reading the newspaper.

"About this matter of the robbery, sir," says I.

He cut me short, peevishly enough — being naturally a poor, weak, womanish sort of man. "Yes, yes, I know," says he. "You have come to tell me that your wonderfully clever man, who has bored holes in my second-floor partition, has made a mistake, and is off the scent of the scoundrel who has stolen my money."

"Yes, sir," says I. "That is one of the things I came to tell you. But I have got something else to say, besides that."

"Can you tell me who the thief is?" says he, more pettish than ever.

"Yes, sir," says I, "I think I can."

He put down the newspaper, and began to look rather anxious and frightened.

"Not my shopman?" says he. "I hope, for the man's own sake, it's not my shopman."

"Guess again, sir," says I.

"That idle slut, the maid?" says he.

"She is idle, sir," says I, "and she is also a slut; my first inquiries about her proved as much as that. But she's not the thief."

"Then, in the name of heaven, who is?" says he.

"Will you please to prepare yourself for a very disagreeable surprise, sir?" says I. "And in case you lose your temper, will you excuse my remarking that I am the stronger man of the two, and that, if you allow yourself to lay hands on me, I may unintentionally hurt you, in pure self-defence?"

He turned as pale as ashes, and pushed his chair two or three feet away from me.

"You have asked me to tell you, sir, who has taken your money," I went on. "If you insist on my giving you an answer —"

"I do insist," he said, faintly. "Who has taken it?"

"Your wife has taken it," I said, very quietly, and very positively at the same time.

He jumped out of the chair as if I had put a knife into him, and struck his fist on the table, so heavily that the wood cracked again.

"Steady, sir," says I. "Flying into a passion won't help you to the truth."

"It's a lie!" says he, with another smack of his fist on the table — "a base, vile, infamous lie! How dare you —"

He stopped, and fell back into the chair again, looked about him in a bewildered way, and ended by bursting out crying.

"When your better sense comes back to you, sir," says I, "I am sure you will be gentleman enough to make an apology for the language you have just used. In the meantime, please to listen, if you can, to a word of explanation. Mr. Sharpin has sent in a report to our inspector, of the most irregular and ridiculous kind; setting down, not only all his own foolish doings and sayings, but the doings and sayings of Mrs. Yatman as well. In most cases, such a document would have been fit only for the waste-paper basket; but, in this particular case, it so happens that Mr. Sharpin's budget of nonsense leads to a certain conclusion which the simpleton of a writer has been quite innocent of suspecting from the beginning to the end. Of that conclusion I am so sure, that I will forfeit my place, if it does not turn out that Mrs. Yatman has been practising upon the folly and conceit of this young man, and that she has tried to shield herself from discovery by purposely encouraging him to suspect the wrong persons. I tell you that confidently; and I will even go further. I will undertake to give a decided opinion as to why Mrs. Yatman took the money, and what she

has done with it, or with a part of it. Nobody can look at that lady, sir, without being struck by the great taste and beauty of her dress —”

As I said those last words, the poor man seemed to find his powers of speech again. He cut me short directly, as haughtily as if he had been a duke instead of a stationer.

“Try some other means of justifying your vile calumny against my wife,” says he. “Her milliner’s bill, for the past year, is on my file of receipted accounts at this moment.”

“Excuse me, sir,” says I, “but that proves nothing. Milliners, I must tell you, have a certain rascally custom which comes within the daily experience of our office. A married lady who wishes it can keep two accounts at her dressmaker’s; — one is the account which her husband sees and pays; the other is the private account, which contains all the extravagant items, and which the wife pays secretly, by instalments, whenever she can. According to our usual experience, these instalments are mostly squeezed out of the housekeeping money. In your case, I suspect no instalments have been paid; proceedings have been threatened; Mrs. Yatman, knowing your altered circumstances, has felt herself driven into a corner; and she has paid her private account out of your cash-box.”

“I won’t believe it,” says he. “Every word

you speak is an abominable insult to me and to my wife."

"Are you man enough, sir," says I, taking him up short, in order to save time and words, "to get that receipted bill you spoke of just now off the file, and come with me at once to the milliner's shop where Mrs. Yatman deals?"

He turned red in the face at that, got the bill directly, and put on his hat. I took out of my pocket-book the list containing the numbers of the lost notes, and we left the house together immediately.

Arrived at the milliner's (one of the expensive West-end houses, as I expected), I asked for a private interview, on important business, with the mistress of the concern. It was not the first time that she and I had met over the same delicate investigation. The moment she set eyes on me, she sent for her husband. I mentioned who Mr. Yatman was, and what we wanted.

"This is strictly private?" inquires the husband. I nodded my head.

"And confidential?" says the wife. I nodded again.

"Do you see any objection, dear, to obliging the sergeant with a sight of the books?" says the husband.

"None in the world, love, if you approve of it," says the wife.

All this while poor Mr. Yatman sat looking the picture of astonishment and distress, quite out of place at our polite conference. The books were brought — and one minute's look at the pages in which Mrs. Yatman's name figured was enough, and more than enough, to prove the truth of every word that I had spoken.

There, in one book, was the husband's account, which Mr. Yatman had settled. And there, in the other, was the private account, crossed off also; the date of settlement being the very day after the loss of the cash-box. This said private account amounted to the sum of a hundred and seventy-five pounds, odd shillings; and it extended over a period of three years. Not a single instalment had been paid on it. Under the last line was an entry to this effect: "Written to for the third time, June 23rd." I pointed to it, and asked the milliner if that meant "last June." Yes, it did mean last June; and she now deeply regretted to say that it had been accompanied by a threat of legal proceedings.

"I thought you gave good customers more than three years' credit?" says I.

The milliner looks at Mr. Yatman, and whispers to me — "Not when a lady's husband gets into difficulties."

She pointed to the account as she spoke. The entries after the time when Mr. Yatman's circumstances

became involved were just as extravagant, for a person in his wife's situation, as the entries for the year before that period. If the lady had economized in other things, she had certainly not economized in the matter of dress.

There was nothing left now but to examine the cash-book, for form's sake. The money had been paid in notes, the amounts and numbers of which exactly tallied with the figures set down in my list.

After that, I thought it best to get Mr. Yatman out of the house immediately. He was in such a pitiable condition, that I called a cab and accompanied him home in it. At first he cried and raved like a child; but I soon quieted him — and I must add, to his credit, that he made me a most handsome apology for his language, as the cab drew up at his house-door. In return, I tried to give him some advice about how to set matters right, for the future, with his wife. He paid very little attention to me, and went upstairs muttering to himself about a separation. Whether Mrs. Yatman will come cleverly out of the scrape or not seems doubtful. I should say, myself, that she will go into screeching hysterics, and so frighten the poor man into forgiving her. But this is no business of ours. So far as we are concerned, the case is now at an end; and the present report may come to a conclusion along with it.

I remain, accordingly, yours to command,

THOMAS BULMER.

P.S. — I have to add, that, on leaving Rutherford Street, I met Mr. Matthew Sharpin coming to pack up his things.

"Only think!" says he, rubbing his hands in great spirits, "I've been to the genteel villa-residence; and the moment I mentioned my business, they kicked me out directly. There were two witnesses of the assault; and it's worth a hundred pounds to me, if it's worth a farthing."

"I wish you joy of your luck," says I.

"Thank you," says he. "When may I pay you the same compliment on finding the thief?"

"Whenever you like," says I, "for the thief is found."

"Just what I expected," says he. "I've done all the work; and now you cut in, and claim all the credit — Mr. Jay, of course?"

"No," says I.

"Who is it then?" says he.

"Ask Mrs. Yatman," says I. "She's waiting to tell you."

"All right! I'd much rather hear it from that charming woman than from you," says he, and goes into the house in a mighty hurry.

What do you think of that, Inspector Theakstone? Would you like to stand in Mr. Sharpin's shoes? I shouldn't, I can promise you!

FROM CHIEF INSPECTOR THEAKSTONE TO MR. MATTHEW
SHARPIN.

July 12th.

SIR,

Sergeant Bulmer has already told you to consider yourself suspended until further notice. I have now authority to add, that your services as a member of the Detective Police are positively declined. You will please to take this letter as notifying officially your dismissal from the force.

I may inform you, privately, that your rejection is not intended to cast any reflections on your character. It merely implies that you are not quite sharp enough for our purpose. If we *are* to have a new recruit among us, we should infinitely prefer Mrs. Yatman.

Your obedient servant,

FRANCIS THEAKSTONE.

NOTE ON THE PRECEDING CORRESPONDENCE, ADDED BY
MR. THEAKSTONE.

The Inspector is not in a position to append any explanations of importance to the last of the letters. It has been discovered that Mr. Matthew Sharpin left the house in Rutherford Street five minutes after his interview outside of it with Sergeant Bulmer — his manner expressing the liveliest emotions of terror and astonishment, and his left cheek displaying a bright patch of red, which looked as if it might have been the result of what is popularly termed a smart box on the ear. He was also heard, by the shopman at Rutherford Street, to use a very shocking expression in reference to Mrs. Yatman; and was seen to clench his fist vindictively, as he ran round the corner of the street. Nothing more has been heard of him; and it is conjectured that he has left London with the intention of offering his valuable services to the provincial police.

On the interesting domestic subject of Mr. and Mrs. Yatman still less is known. It has, however, been positively ascertained that the medical attendant of the family was sent for in a great hurry on the day when Mr. Yatman returned from the milliner's shop. The neighbouring chemist received, soon afterwards, a prescription of a soothing nature to make up for Mrs. Yatman. The day after, Mr. Yatman purchased some smelling-salts at the shop, and afterwards appeared at the circulating library to ask for a novel, descriptive of high life, that would amuse an invalid lady. It has been inferred from these circumstances that he has not thought it desirable to carry out his threat of separating himself from his wife — at least in the present (presumed) condition of that lady's sensitive nervous system.

THE END.

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Let's 21... 66.

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